Radu Petre Mureșan

Metamorphoses of religion and spirituality in contemporary Romanian society



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METAMORPHOSES OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN SOCIETY

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Motto:

Beloved, believe not every spirit,
but try the spirits whether they are of God:
because many false prophets
are gone out into the world.
(I John 4, 1)

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The interest in the interdisciplinary research of the religious phenomenon in which theology merges with history, the sociology of religions, and psychology took shape during the study grants and research internships abroad, where I had the privilege of benefiting from the support and guidance of established specialists in the field. Prof.Guido Vergauwen, at that time Director of the *Institut d'études œcuméniques* in Friborg and dean of the Catholic University of Fribourg, was a good *connaisseur* of Orthodox theology and spirituality[1], Prof. Jean-Francois Mayer, one of the best-known specialists in the history and evolution of new religious movements, currently founder and editor of Religioscope, an independent research platform that provides information and analysis on the role of religion in the world[2], respectively Prof. Dr. Jörg Stolz, a renowned researcher of the sociology of religions, professor at the *Institut de sciences sociales des religions* (ISSR), of the University of Lausanne and former Director of the *Observatory of Religions* at the same University[3].

After defending in 2006 the doctoral thesis "The Attitude of Traditional European Churches towards Adventist Proselytism, Its Impact on Contemporary Society" at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology "Patriarch Justinian" at the University of Bucharest, which brought an interdisciplinary approach, little used in Romanian theological research at the time, I started an investigation, *ab initio,* about spiritual alternatives. that manifested themselves in post-communist Romania. The study which resulted has analysed the New Age phenomenon, the propagation of neopaganism, the impact of scientology, the characteristics of reiki practice, as well as the human potential movement (HPM). The study concluded with this remark: "Our research does not claim to have exhausted the topic. The emergence of these «spiritual alternatives» is so fast-paced that in a few years' time, the shelves of the «religious supermarket» will be filled with new «products, appealingly wrapped and advertised, waiting to be tested[4].

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[1] https://www.unifr.ch/iso/fr/ (acccessed on 24 May 2024)
[2] https://english.religion.info/about/faq/ (acccessed on 24 May 2024)
[3] https://irel.ephe.psl.eu/ressources-pedagogiques/liens-internet/ors-unil-observatoire-religions-suisse-universite-lausanne (acccessed on 24 May 2024)
[4] Radu Petre Mureșan, *Alternative spirituale în România,* Editura Agnos, Sibiu, 2011.

The present study aims to identify metamorphoses of religiosity and religious spirituality in contemporary Romanian society and outline viable missionary-pastoral milestones for an effective Orthodox missionary strategy in a constantly changing world. Concretely, the research aims to treat several alternative spirituality hypotheses considered relevant in current Romanian society: neo-paganism, the reiki healing method and the human potential development movement, all of which are part of the broader phenomenon of New Age spirituality.

The New Age spirituality is both an old and a new phenomenon in Romania. As the researcher Constantina Reveca Buleu demonstrated, in the interwar period there was an interest in the writings of René Guénon (1886–1951). Several intellectuals corresponded with him, and in 1934 the first esoteric magazine of that period was created, *Memra*[5]. New Age elements perpetuated also during the communist period and immediately after the events of 1989, as Bruno Würz, Deacon Prof. Petre David of Rev. Prof. Nicolae Achimescu pointed out at the time. However, I believe that the actual New Age boom was initially felt after the year 2000, with the arrival of some typical Western movements or currents (of which we have chosen to present *Ramtha's School of Enlightenment* – RSE and *Humanity's Team*) or the emergence of an "autochthonous" New Age, which emphasizes the idea of Romania's esoteric role.

The last decades have witnessed a surge of interest in Romania in a wide range of spiritual quests that share, as a common denominator, an appreciation of esotericism, especially in the theosophical vein, a fascination with everything related to Oriental mysticism and spirituality, an interest in the occult and the irrational, increased popularisation of paranormal phenomena and of the idea that we live in a world of mysteries (conversations with spirits or extraterrestrials), millenarian expectations linked to the transition to the age of Aquarius, the proliferation of pagan beliefs, adherence to alternative healing methods that complement traditional medicine (bioenergy, Reiki, acupuncture, etc.); the proliferation of courses and seminars teaching techniques for relieving stress, achieving psychological comfort, mental development, communication with one's own subconscious (the Silva method, transcendental meditation, neuro-linguistic programming, etc.)

This effervescence had been characteristic of Western countries since the 1960s and 1970s and demonstrates at that time that religious sentiment is making a comeback, even though secularisation theorists had

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[5] Constantina Reveca Buleu, *Splendor Singularis, Studii despre esoterism,* Editura Ideea Europeană, 2021, p. 29.

given it no chance of returning. Sociologists of religion who have endeavoured to define the phenomenon have spoken either of the "religious renewal" or "de-secularisation" or of the "decomposition" or "recomposition" of religion in the modern era (Gilles Kepel, Danièle Hérvieu-Léger, Yves Lambert, Jean-Paul Willaime)[6]. The manifestations of this religious sentiment were novel, often embracing beliefs, sensibilities, practices marginal to the traditional religious landscape or even alien to it[7].

It is very important to distinguish between the *New Age movement*, which emerged in America in the 1960s, and the *New Age spirituality* which it tapped into. New Age spirituality is a set of beliefs that crystallised over many centuries, from the alchemists and visionaries of the Middle Ages to the theosophists and admirers of Eastern beliefs in the 19th and 20th centuries. New Age spirituality played an important role not only in the development of the New Age movement, but also in the emergence of other forms of alternative spirituality[8]. In fact, as we shall see below, Neo-Paganism, human potential movement, and therapeutic techniques such as Reiki, may in one way or another fall under the overarching umbrella of *New Age spirituality.*

Post-modern religious sense, as it has been called, is *grosso modo* characterized by refusal to align itself with a particular collective religious tradition, and by proposing a personal spiritual quest instead of religious proper practice. In fact, post-modern religiosity reflects that belief, widespread among our contemporaries, that people can have a spiritual life outside the Church, that truth does not have to be tied to a particular institution as its repository, that people can be moral in family and society without reference to a particular religion[9]. This "creed" is sometimes

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[6] Gilles Kepel, *La revanche de Dieu. Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde,* Paris, Le Seuil, 1991 (*Dumnezeu își ia revanșa. Creștini, evrei și musulmani recuceresc lumea,* translation from French by Rodica Maria Valter and Radu Valter, Bucharest, Artemis, 1994) ; Danièle Hervieu-Leger et Davie Grace (eds.), *Identités religieuses en Europe,* Paris, Le Seuil, 1991 (especially the introduction by Daniele Hervieu-Leger) ; Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion,* Paris, Gallimard, 1995 (*Dezvrăjirea lumii,* Romanian translation, Nemira, Bucharest, 2006). See also Idem, *Ieșirea din religie,* Humanitas, Bucharest, 2006.

[7] Jean Vernette, *Jésus au péril des sectes,* Desclée, Paris, 1994, p. 5.

[8] Wouter Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought,* Leiden, 1996, p.97

[9] Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the 21st century. Reflections on the challanges ahead*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 5. On his turn, Marcel Gauchet noted: „To exit from religion does not necessarily mean to exit from a religious belief, but to exit from a world where religion is structuring, where it commands the political shape of societies and where it defines the economy of social bonds. To exit from religion is to move to a world where

extended into a lay religiosity by engagement in “sacred” causes such as ecology or the defence of human rights (“open secularism”).

The first chapter of this book deals with the proliferation of alternative religiosity and spirituality in relation to the New Age spirituality, granting attention to its characteristics and manifestations and approaching two case studies: Ramtha School of Enlightenment and Humanity’s Team. The second chapter shows how globally organized Neo-paganism is also attempting to “conquer” Romania by various means, such as running workshops or making efforts to gain visibility online. My investigation also addresses the ways of coming into contact with modern paganism as early as the childhood years (cartoons, pagan-themed films), modern witchcraft (Wicca), and the way in which neo-paganism regards Christianity.

In my study of alternative spirituality in Romania, I examined the doctrine, practice, organization, and ceremonies of the "Church of Scientology" as well as its impact in Romania, as revealed by press releases or information posted on the Church of Scientology's official websites. When I revisited the topic a few years later, I found that academic interest in the study of science is low in Romania. This scarcity of interest, compared to the rich bibliography dedicated to the topic in the West, may be a result of the general conviction that Scientology has no significant impact in Romania. Indeed, despite the translation of the movement's founder's works into Romanian, the "Church of Scientology" lacks a Romanian-language website, and the closest scientological churches are located in Budapest, Kiev, and Chișinău. According to my knowelde, the Church of Scientology Mission of Kozpont Szekelyudvarhelyi, located in Odorheiu Secuiesc, is the only mission center located in Romania and registered on the official website of the "Church of Scientology".

The Romanian-language website, exclusively dedicated to missionary volunteers working in Romania, which I could accessed while gathering information for my research work (http://www.voluntari-humanitari.co.ro/), is currently disabled. The distribution of promotional brochures and thematic leaflets, as well as the construction of billboards, accompanied the presence of Scientologists in Bucharest and other cities, promoting their books and the humanitarian actions of the Church of Scientology. However, the impact of scientology in Romania is low in comparison with Western countries or the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and that’s why I decided not to include scientology in the present

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religions continue to exist, but within a political form and a collective form that it no longer determines” (Marcel Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie. Parcours de la laïcité,* Paris, Gallimard, 1998, p. 11).

study dedicated to the metamorphoses of religiosity and spirituality in Romania.

Reiki is a Japanese healing technique, legally recognized as an alternative therapy in Romania (Law no. 118/2007). Considered as such, Reiki would not seem to find its place in a study conducted from a missionary perspective. However, as the present study will demonstrate, Reiki as an Eastern healing therapy has been transferred to the West, and during this process, it has lost much of its original content, receiving many theosophical additions instead. Moreover, certain Reiki masters in Romania blend Reiki and Orthodoxy in a New Age cocktail resulting in the relativization of Christian teachings. All this leads to the conclusion that the Reiki practiced in Romania is a missionary topic that deserves be further explored.

Likewise, including the topics focusing on the development of human potential in a missionary approach might seem surprising. Landmark Forum or Neuro-Linguistic Programming are courses that claim to provide their clients with psychological or cognitive awareness, as well as certain techniques for improving communication, and improving relationships with other persons. It is true that these courses and programs do not claim to be religious and operate according to all the rules of the market economy: their activity consists of courses, internships or seminars, whether or not accompanied by sales of books or technical support. As will be shown below, these courses subtly manipulate values and beliefs, deconstructing one's personality, and replacing it with the "new man" for whom everything is foccused on material gain, profit, success and efficiency.

All these are topics are only scarcely found among the concerns of missiologists in Romania. A simple, but not sufficient explanation is that all these are perceived as movements or groups specific to the Western countries, and that their impact in Romania is negligible. However, as this book will show, we are witnessing their attempts to organize themselves, to become established, efforts to gain visibility, popularization through the media or by publishing of books in Romanian language. Numerous TV programs as well as certain periodicals promote everything related to magic, occultism, esotericism, healing techniques, chakras, tarot, zodiacs, paranormal phenomena, UFOs and aliens. Bookstores in Romania are practically saturated with this kind of literature, which sells very well.

In our opinion, it is more important for missionary research to stay current with relevant changes in the religious landscape than to focus on the past. In this context, the remark of Rev. Prof. Nicolae Achimescu is highly pertinent: "Regrettably, today's theologians often over-examine the past to the detriment of exploring the future. To them, the problems raised by

Arianism, Macedonianism, Sophianism, are far more important than the great challenges of today and the future developments, even though those problems were promptly resolved at the time by Ecumenical Councils or other Church bodies. We look too much to the burden of the past, ignoring the present and the future of the Church"[10]. Undoubtedly, the cults and sects, older or newer, or those we generically term new religious movements, must remain in the area of missionary concerns, must be monitored in order to signal doctrinal changes, new strategies of proselytism or possible deviations.

In fact, certain experts in the study of New Religious Movements believe that "classic" groups such as the "Jehovah's Witnesses" and the "Church of Latter-Day Saints" have ceased to grow rapidly in advanced Western societies. They seem to have reached a limit to their success on the religious market, so they are considered no longer attractive to new customers. Door-to-door missionaries, or those walking the streets with their Bibles in their hands, are becoming ineffective in face of the new market strategies, just as door-to-door salesmen and small retailers have been "crushed" by supermarkets and shopping malls[11].

The present study aims to demonstrate that all this spiritual quest that is confined to satisfying individual desires and interests is nothing but materialism under the guise of a spiritual aura. It is basically a trivialization of religion, reducing it to a consumer good: quickly bought, it then becomes obsolete and is easily replaced[12]. In terms of methodology, my research focused on the ideas put forth by the above mentioned manifestations of religiosity and spirituality, as they have been presented in books, brochures, publications or on official websites. In dealing with topics, I have preferred a descriptive presentation, conducive to a correct understanding of the particularities of a group or a current, all the more so as these forms of "alternative spirituality" have not received due attention so far. Generally speaking, the most correct approach to any "alternative spirituality",

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[10] Nicolae Achimescu, *Noile mișcări Religioase,* Limes, Cluj-Napoca, 2004, p. 310.

[11] Groups like the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses have reached a saturation point in the United States and several other nations, a point from which they are unlikely to grow any further – cf. James Lewis, *The Growth of Scientology and the Stark Model of Religious "Success",* in *Scientology,* edited by James R. Lewis, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 117-140, p. 134; the same idea Jean-François Mayer, *Les Nouvelles Voies Spirituelles. Enquête sur la religiosité parallèle en Suisse,* L'âge d'Homme, 1993, p. 31 : „Sects or New Religious Movements with rigid structures, in a tense relationship with the world, exist and may continue to attract attention, but their impact is less than might have been imagined in the past."

[12] Jean Francois Mayer, *Confessions d'un chasseur des sectes*, 1990, p. 6.

whatever its specifics, is to be informed, by reading everything available on the subject, from apologetic literature or testimonies of former members, to information in the press, to specialist literature. Information should include the circumstances in which a particular alternative movement arose, relevant data about the founder (if any), teachings that have changed over time for accommodation with surrounding society, possible contradictory statements.

We primarily address the following considerations to theologians and those involved in the mission and pastoral ministry of the Church, but also to those who are interested in understanding how alternative religiosity and spirituality function in contemporary Romania. Our research examines the contemporary mutations of the religious phenomenon in Romania in their double pose of challenges and opportunities for the Church's mission. It also advocates for a contextualized understanding of the Orthodox mission, liberating it from the restrictive perspective of *pro-domo* apologetics and the constraints of an exclusively theoretical approach. Institutional bodies, specially created and empowered, should follow our inquiry with an introspective investigation. I am convinced that only by combining the research field on alternative religiosity and spirituality with pastoral-missionary work can one enhance Orthodox missionary strategy in a constantly changing world.

I would like to thank my former students, whose interest in learning about these forms of spirituality created a beneficial emulation for the publication of this book and offered me new directions for reflection and research. I also express my gratitude to those who provided me with crucial books or documents, without which I could not have published this study in its current form.

THE PROLIFERATION OF THE ALTERNATIVE RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY

1. **Sociological perspective**

When examining the religious phenomenon in postmodernity, the sociology of religions employs several theoretical approaches. The first theoretical approach is the secularization thesis (Richard Berger), which starts from the premise that modernization has a negative impact on religion and religiosity. A society's increasing material prosperity leads to a decrease in religious vitality and the marginalization of traditional religious cultures. The concrete result of secularization is low church attendance, as well as the fact that people no longer consider religion important in their lives. Adherents of this theory argued that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are currently going through a process of secularization that, over time, will follow the model of Western Europe.

Individualism theory (Thomas Luckmann) presents a nuanced position that recognizes the impact of modernization on religious life but distinguishes between institutionalized religion on the one hand and private religiosity on the other. While secularization theory advocates the decline of both, individualization theory predicts a decline in institutional forms but denies a decline in personal religiosity. In this context, the British sociologist Davie Grace characterizes the religiosity of post-modern society through a play on words: "believing without belonging". Researchers of the religious phenomenon have shown that religious plurality, individual religious style, and syncretism are born from individualism, so that contemporary man adheres to ideas from different religious traditions and combines them in his own religious cocktail. Adherents of this theory argue that the current situation in Central and Eastern Europe is conducive to private religiosity and note an unprecedented development of syncretism.

The thesis on the "privatization of religion" further elaborated on this theory, arguing that not only have religious institutions lost their ability to truly influence society, but also that "religion has become an object of personal choice." The number of people in Europe who don't go to church grows every year, and experts point out the paradox of living in a secularized world while also having religious people around through new religious movements or forms of religiosity. These forces traditional religious structures to change how they talk about themselves or "re-invent" themselves as social actors.

Finally, sociologists Rodney Stak and Laurence Iannaccone support the theory of religious marketing, which examines the religious phenomenon based on market criteria, specifically supply and demand. The two sociologists understand secularization as a qualitative process—a process that affects not religion itself but the quality of religion. According to Rodney Stak and Laurence Iannaccone, the presence of a religion in society depends on "the ability and zeal of that religion to make attractive offers to potential followers." Supporters of this theory assert that post-communist society presents a prime opportunity for the establishment of a religious market free from traditional religious structures.

An interesting position in this context is that of Massimo Introvigne, who shows that for the traditional churches, the biggest challenge is not so much the new religious movements but the new religiosity of the Europeans, which is relativism. The new religiosity, as a wider area of ideas and trends, no longer considers the truth as something absolute but is dependent on a certain variable, which can be human reason, feeling, culture, or society. From a sociological perspective, the weakening authority of great religions and confessions favors the spread of new religious beliefs. In modern societies, individuals feel less and less bound by religious doctrines and prescriptions, and the process of subjectivization of faith leads to confusion and involves a predisposition either to change religion or to embrace relativism.

I briefly invoked these well-known sociological theories to show that the religious phenomenon in contemporary Romanian society presents certain characteristics that distinguish it in relation to other states in Central and Eastern Europe, despite the fact that CEE countries shared the same destiny with them after the Second World War. As we have demonstrated in the published studies and the scientific papers, Romania does not definitively fit into any of these models, but there are several emerging processes that take place in parallel and whose evolution in the future is hard to predict. In today's Romania, spiritual and religious alternatives are regarded with great curiosity, like products that should be tested. Especially the young generation born and educated after 1990's feels attracted by mystery and willing to become members of initiatic or secret groups. But people of all ages are equally interested in esotericism, and allow themselves to be seduced by healers, magicians, apparitions. Many persons simply feel the need to broaden their religious culture, to get to know the primitive religions of the East or of the ancient world, to experiment with esotericism, occultism, gnosis. There are also other, more pragmatic persons who by adhering to these groups or movements aim to solve personal problems or achieve professional success.

In this context I mention some of the conclusions reached by sociological surveys concerning the religious situation across Romania. These surveys reveal that between 1990- 2000, Romania was among the countries with the lowest non-affiliation level in Europe, with only 2% of the population declaring they did not belong to any religion. Considering that in sociological studies, the affiliation level is an indicator for the degree of secularization of any society, this means that at the time Romania was one of the least secularized European countries. Also in the above-mentioned period, Romania was one of the European "champions" of religious practice in the private sphere, with 70% of respondents declaring that they routinely prayed at least once a week[13].

This situation – a surprising one since Romania was an Eastern-European country subject to forced secularization – should, however, be taken with a grain of salt because they reveal a discrepancy between this apparent commitment to Orthodoxy on the one hand, and the beliefs and practices that ought to be entailed by it on the other. For instance, 96% (one of the highest percentages in Europe) of the Romanians interviewed during the European Values Survey (EVS) declared that they believed in God. However, only 37.3% indicated a belief in the incarnate God – that is, in the divine-human person of Lord Jesus Christ, while 45.6% expressed a belief in a life-giving spirit or a life force. It is difficult to correlate percentages indicating participation in religious services on the one hand with those relating to religious or spiritual belief on the other. Colin Campbell argues that the relevant shift in recent years has not been from believing to not believing, but rather from believing to searching.[14]. Therefore, Campbell asserts that the category of "sympathizers," i.e., individuals with preexisting beliefs and attitudes that predispose them to adhere to the distinctive teachings of a cult at a particular time, plays a crucial role[15].

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[13] Mălina Voicu, *România religioasă. Pe valul european sau în urma lui?/ Religious Romania. On the European wave or behind it?,* Institutul European, 2007, p. 54. Voicu investigated three dimensions of religious commitment: religious belief, religious practice, and implications in daily life, in other words, the was religiosity is manifest at individual level. Mălina Voicu's study processes and analyzes the data provided by *European Values Survey (EVS)* – the EVS databases 1993, 1997, 1999. The results of this research are also analyzed by Elena Iulia Gheorghiu, *Religiozitate și creștinism în România post-comunistă/*Religiosity and Christianism în post-communist Romania, „Sociologie românească", no. 3 (2003), pp. 102-121.

[14] Colin Campbell, *Some comments on the new religious movements, the new spirituality and post-industrial society,* p. 237

[15] Wuthnow, Robert, *Christianity in the 21st century. Reflections on the challenges ahead*, Oxford University Press, 1993

In this context, Prof. Jorg Stolz, a sociologist of religions, argued that the expected New Age of love, harmony, and unity never materialized. That's why the once-presented beliefs or practices under this umbrella have now become hidden and manifested under the names of alternative spirituality, esotericism, or mind-body-soul therapies. Sociologists continue to be interested in the New Age movement, despite the unfulfilled prophecies and unachieved ambitious goals. The movement's significant social effects, such as the societal acceptance of the occult, are still evident today. This might be less spectacular, but it is sociologically just as, or even more, interesting[16].

Prof. Stolz concludes that network communication and market structures distinguish the social structures of the New Age movement. On the one hand, the New Age spirituality consisted of a network of individuals and groups who more or less aligned themselves with the goals and viewpoints of New Age thought and who had at least some contact with individuals and groups who profess the same ideas. At times, individuals forme groups explicitly to promote the New Age's arrival. At other times, however, spiritual seekers and groups have added a New Age label to their ideas and activities, reframing them. On the other hand, the New Age used market structures, linking the producers of New-Age content to the consumers of that content. Booksellers, music stores, fairs, and supermarkets continue to sell New Age products in various forms, including books, records, journals, objects, and courses. The Romanian case exemplifies the double manifestation of the New Age as a social actor, where religiosity and alternative spirituality have asserted themselves through both network and market structures. The congresses and fairs, followed by the periodicals, and the network of entrepreneurs dealing with alternative spirituality deserve special recognition. They provide weekend or weeklong courses for the purchase, learning, and application of spiritual methods.

2. New Age spirituality. Two case studies.

In early 2009, several representatives of ***Ramtha's School of Enlightenment – RSE*** visited Romania for the first time. The "introductory meeting" with those interested, which took place at the Lipscani Theatre,

[16] What we are faced with is thus hardly a « New Age », as was promised, but a « new societal situation » which in fact is very different from what was expected from New Age actors forty years ago. This might be less spectacular but it is sociologically just as - or even more - interesting (Jorg Stolz and Joelle Sanchez, *From New Age to Alternative Spirituality. Remark on the Swiss Case*, p. 1- 11, p. 10)

went almost unnoticed by the media, but was reported by websites centered on esotericism. A few months later, similar meetings were organised in Iași (7 August, Unirea Hotel) and Timișoara (8 August, the Hungarian Theatre). The events, offered free of charge by Greg Simmons, one of the School's teachers, were designed to prepare the first RSE seminars in Romania, to be held in Brebu Nou, Caraș Severin county.

RSE also has an official website in Romanian language (www.ram-romania.ro) where we learn that Ramtha allegedly lived 35,000 years ago on the ancient, now extinct continent called Lemuria. From the Romanian translation of the English-language site, a rather clumsy translation, we learn that Ramtha "found a way to take his body to a mental level (?!), where he remained fully conscious, had the freedom to experience all aspects of creation and to make known the unknown. When he finally decided to leave this world, he ascended (!?) before his people, a 2 million-strong army, promising them that he would return, after he had taught them all he knew, for 120 days." Today, J.Z. Knight (b. 1946), an American from New Mexico is "the only channel Ramtha has chosen and uses to convey his message in person"[17].

The RSE seminars held at Brebu Nou, on two levels (beginners + follow-up), took place between 10-18 October 2009. The event's advertising stated that participants could learn how to use a breathing technique that "neutralises one's own objections to the creation of desired things"; how to know the thoughts sent by another person or what contains a box in a distant location; how to acquire a form of 'focus' that allows access to the deeper levels of the mind needed to create desired experiences; how to manipulate the electromagnetic fields around the body to achieve the state needed to create a fabulous reality; how to acquire the science of quantum healing of oneself and others; how to manipulate consciousness to change one's life. Those interested were reminded that by attending this seminar they met the requirements to become students, if they wished to continue their training in the RSE school.

What struck me was the prohibitive price of registering for this event: $1,000 before September 19 and $1,100 after that date, plus the follow-up price of $500. Note that this did not include accommodation, meals and translation costs. The translation fee, for example, was €80 for the introductory course and €40 for the follow-up, to be paid in cash on

[17] On Ramtha, see Paul Greer, *The Aquarian Confusion. Conflincting Theologies of the New Age,* "Journal of Contemporary Religion", vol. 10, no. 2, 1995, pp. 155- 156; Wouter Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought,* Leiden, 1996, pp. 40-41.

arrival. For accommodation, the amount payable was between €70 and 128, and the cost of meals varied between €200 and 256. Payment methods were indicated in detail for all possible cases: online payment, credit card or bank transfer. It was mentioned that if paying by credit card, for example, the statement would show the price of the event plus the exchange fee and bank commission. Also, no payment was refundable unless the event was canceled.

We do not know whether the course was well attended. On the official website the figure is 81 persons, including 20 participants from Austria and Switzerland. What we do know for certain is that bookstores specializing in esoteric literature have offered several RSE books. In 2009 alone, a number of books were published by MMS (Mastering Mind and Soul) Publishing House: *Cine suntem noi de fapt (Who We Really Are), Trezirea la o viață extraordinară (Awakening to an Extraordinary Life), Ghidul începătorului pentru crearea realității. O introducere în învățăturile lui Ramtha (The Beginner's Guide to Creating Reality. An Introduction to the Teachings of Ramtha).*

I browsed through one of the RSE books in Romanian, *Ramtha, Ghidul începătorului pentru crearea realității. O introducere în învățăturile lui Ramtha (The Beginner's Guide to Creating Reality. An Introduction to Ramtha's Teachings),* M.M.S. Publishing House, 2009, which, according to the publishers, was the result of a "huge team effort, inspired by the same feeling of love we all have for our Master Teacher Ramtha and his words of wisdom". At the core of the RSE teachings is the idea of 'void', and 'emptiness' which means a vast nothingness in material terms, but everything in potential terms. This is the essence of the uncreated being – the uncreated God – the nothingness from which all potentialities arise (p. 18). The concept of God the Creator is described by Ramtha as the Void contemplating and knowing itself: "All the teachings and disciplines of the Great Work, conceived and used by Ramtha to initiate his students, are modelled on the process of the Self-contemplating Void and in a way imitate it. This process gave rise to contemplation and to the energy which in turn created the nature of reality" (after the Romanian translation – pp. 47, 50). Thus consciousness and energy create reality.

Another important idea is the statement "You are God": "You are God. Will you say that? Louder. Well, you see you weren't burned alive saying that? This is not blasphemy, this is Holy Scripture" (after the Romanian translation, p. 49). RSE claims to remind people that they are divine and immortal entities and that "everyone can be god". Each individual is a particle of the absolute; people have simply lost awareness of this. Truth is relative: everyone is right, because everyone is god and has the

freedom to create his/her own truth. It's interesting to see how a RSE course begins: "I salute the God within you. Let us pray that we never forget where He dwells. Let us drink! O beloved God. I declare that whatever I focus on, I certainly want it. Materialize it immediately. So be it. To life. Sit down and let's get to work..." (after the Romanian translation, p. 237).

We also note the feminist message of this alleged revelation. It stresses that Ramtha chose to channel his message through a woman's body, rather than using his own physical body – in order to emphasize that "God and divinity are not male prerogatives and that women have always been worthy expressions of the divine, capable of genius and being God-manifest"[18]. Another idea found in RSE books is that all the teachings that exist in ancient traditions and Christianity are nothing but echoes of Ramtha's teachings.

When I recently resumed my research on this topic, I noted that RSE has had a new official website in Romanian language (http://scoalaramtha.wixsite.com/romania), the counterpart of the official website in English. Translation is much better compared to the old website, which was rather unfriendly to Romanian users. However, the Romanian version includes parts that cannot be found on the English-language website, but may be relevant for the Romanian context where the majority of the population are Orthodox Christians: „*Ramtha School of Enlightenment combines multiple contemporary scientific currents and research, asserting the principle that God is within every one of us. The message that you are a divine being, means that you have a direct experience of God, a channel for unmediated communication with Him. You do not need priests or missionaries to intervene on your behalf and prevent you from communicating directly with God*"[19].

I can note the prohibitive cost of RSE seminars and courses. The new website is much more abstruse. The "Events" chapter contains nothing, while the "Contact" simply provides an e-mail address. Some Ramtha events held in Romania are announced on the Facebook page, but those interested in learning more on attending are invited to adhere to the Ram group-Romania. Most information concerning RSE events in Romania can be found on websites specializing in esotericism. Since 2009-2010, these

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[18] *Ghidul începătorului pentru crearea realității. O introducere în învățăturile lui Ramtha,* MM.S., 2009, pp. 32-33: „Women are the most prejudiced group of people who have ever lived, because women have never been allowed the divine right of God and they have no representation in heaven...It is important that when teachings are passed on they are passed on through a woman's body, that when women hear them they realize that God is not only a father but also a mother and that God is both father and mother…."

[19] https://scoalaramtha.wixsite.com/romania/despre-rse (accessed on 25 May 2024)

media have been mentioning the name of a „Ramtha expert" of Brașov, as the contact person for *Ramtha School of Enlightenment* in Romania. Between 2011-2012 who was invited to a number of TV programs dedicated to esotericism and occultism[20]. In 2011, RSE launched the Ramtha Video program, which provides video-taught Ramtha doctrine, obviously translated into Romanian. In recent years, the bookshops that specialize in esotericism have published several RSE books authored by JZ Knight.

The conclusion is that currently efforts are made to build a local organization where Romanians are of course recruited: there is a website whose translation is now more Romanian-friendly, there is a contact person described as a „Ramtha expert", there are videos with Romanian subtitles, as well as TV programs to propagate the Ramtha doctrine, and personal blogs that seem to indicate some interest in this New Age movement; and, not least, there are the increasingly frequent seminars and workshops.

Another instance of imported alternative spirituality is Humanity's Team, also a New Age movement movement with American roots, established by the American Neale Donald Walsch, the author of the *Conversations with God* books. The movement "*proposes a new spirituality that enlarges and enhances humanity's current beliefs about God and about life*". It has been known in Romania since 2007, when a number of Romanians attended a workshop held by Donald Walsch at Chișinău. In 2010 Humanity's Team nonprofit Association was established, aiming to "*support the unity of the human family, the social integration of the young coming from underprivileged families, protect the environment, promote human values, provide education for change and health, promote social welfare and human rights*". In starting and running this Association, an important role is played by Catalina Sursilov who represents Romania in the international community, coordinates the local volunteers' team, organizes events, and manages the website of Humanity's Team in Romania.

On the home page of the Romanian-language website (http://www.humanitysteam.ro/) we can read a passage from Walsch's books: "The Great Idea is that We Are All One. The Great Idea is that there is only One God – and that this God doesn't care whether you are Catholic or Protestant, Jewish or Muslim, Indian or Mormon, or have no religion at all. The Great Idea is that all we have to do is love each other.....". One of *Humanity's Team* projects is Mandala, which aims to promote peace

[20] See, for instance, esoteric show „Conspirația tăcerii"/ The consipiracy of Silence, presented at Romanian TV channel N24 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPLCzXaLhjA, (accessed on 25 May 2024)

through art and education[21]. The mandala is an ancient, circular, geometric design traditionally used in Buddhism and Hinduism as an aid to meditation. In concrete terms, the Mandala Project involves an online gallery through which any interested person, regardless of nationality, gender, beliefs, is invited to submit a photo, a message of peace and an email address. The photo will become part of a collective piece of art, a giant mandala, reflecting diversity in unity. The Mandala Project is insidiously promoted in education to integrate art, science and philosophy in a New Age manner[22].

Here is the invitation to join Mandala Project that can be found on the Romanian-language Humanity's Team website: "Humanity's Team Romania will join a project of Oneness... If you find it interesting and enjoyable to make a "peace portrait", join the Mandala project. Canadian artist Russell Maier is cycling around the world, passing through as many countries as possible to meet as many people as possible and make the project known. All the while, he collects peace portraits and builds the mandala. Humanity's Team, through its communities in 90 countries, facilitates the promotion of the project on a wider area... as an expression of our Oneness, we collaborate to build a giant mandala. By awakening the world to Oneness, we can heal the rift between us by living together the joyful celebration we all desire. The Mandala is constructed from self-portraits of ordinary people from around the world sending peace. We plan to unfurl a giant Mandala of 10,000 peace portraits on 10/10/10 in front of the United Nations headquarters. Help us build the Mandala by sending your portrait and your peace!....The idea that we are all one is a simple idea but has worldwide implications. It is a radical idea that abolishes the boundaries, dogmas and prejudices that have prevented us from turning our lives into the joyful celebration we all want them to be. The more deeply we realize that what we do to others, we do to ourselves, the more harmonious and joyful the world will be. We are indeed all one".

A number of lectures, courses and seminars on New Age topics take place daily in Bucharest and other major cities. The supply appealing to esoteric enthusiasts includes, for instance, *Cursul esoteric nondualist pentru spiritualitate în mijlocul vieții, trezire a sufletului și cunoaștere de sine, intitulat „Calea inimii- Ad Anima" (The non-dualist esoteric course for mid-life spirituality, soul awakening and self-knowledge, entitled "The Way of the Heart - Ad Anima")* (www.caleainimii.ro). For a contribution of 60 lei/month, those interested can attend the weekly course where they learn

[21] http://www.mandalaproject.org/Index.html (accessed on 25 May 2024)

[22] From pastoral practice, we know that mandalas are used in kindergartens in Romania, as colouring pages for "fussier" children, to help them focus on themselves.

meditation of the heart, the Art of Supreme Grace, Tantra of the Divine Heart (of the essential identity between the human being, the world and God), natural nutrition, or simply the art of living healthily.

There are also esoteric clubs, such as the Mandala Club in Bucharest (http://www.mandalaclub.ro/). Those interested can find here a vegetarian restaurant, a tea shop with organic teas, a bookstore on spirituality, esotericism and personal development, a jewellery shop with silver and semi-precious crystals; they can attend musical evenings, thematic trips and camps, exhibitions and films, they can also participate in counselling sessions on astrology, personal development, coaching related to profession, couple/relationship issues or problematic situations in personal life. It is interesting to mention that the Mandala Club has the following partners: PetrasBio (ecological producer of pasta and cereal), Christofori International Waldorf Kindergarten, the Body and Mind Magazine (holistic approach to life), Elemental (producer of ecological products), the anthroposophical journal „Pământ sfânt"("Holy Earth").

Since 2013, the movement's members have engaged in education and personal development projects with children in adoption centers, supported single mothers, and sponsored the access to education for children in deprived families. Humanity's Team activities are based on volunteering. The website contains calls to volunteering, associating the notion of spiritual evolution to the aid offered to others: "*evolving is the direct goal of any soul, and evolution is linked to generosity and the willingness to support others*".

The mass media actively promotes Humanity's Team Movement, primarily for its social projects and Walsch's books has been into Romanian in multiple editions. Walsch himself visited Romania in 2014, giving the lecture "Success and Wellbeing," announced on specialized websites as "the landmark of the last decade." The same website announced that "for one day, attendants will receive Neale's assistance in understanding and integrating the concepts that are able to change lives, bring peace to people's minds and souls, and live a life of stability and abundance... During this event, everything you will learn is easy to put into practice and does not require any subsequent financial investments. You are the one who will change everything!"[23]

The mentioning of "no *subsequent financial investments*" is important, because attending this one-day event required a ticket whose price varied according to the option chosen. The event was advertised according to the rules of marketing and publicity: "*All those who call me to*

[23] https://www.aisucces.ro/neale-donald-walsch-in-romania/ (accessed on 25 May 2024)

order at least one of the three types of tickets, will receive a <u>*free*</u> *copy of volumes 1, 2 and 3 in the* Conversations with God *series, by Neale Donald Walsch!!! Place your order now!*"[24]. The esoterical website aisucces.ro reads: "*As I see it, no price can be too high for the chance to meet Neale Donald Walsch, but the organizers –* "*Discover yourself" and Life Guru Associations – wanted to make a* <u>*gift*</u> *to all Romanians, so they calculated an investment accessible to everyone*"[25]. The prices "*accesibile*" to Romanians were 99 euro (the "silver" ticket), 149 euro (the "gold" ticket), respectively 249 euro (the "VIP" ticket), while the minimum monthly salary in Romania amounted to around 200 euro at the time. Also on the occasion of Donald Walsch's visit to Romania, certain esoterical websites provided online video access to the conference, at a much lower price: "*You can watch the event* "*Success and Wellbeing'' LIVE, in the comfort of your home, at your office, or wherever you have internet access! For just 97 RON* (around 20 euro) *you can purchase the Online Ticket... A further advantage: you will be able to watch the event for 60 days after it takes place!*"[26].

3. Characteristics of the New Age spirituality

The New Age is the contemporary manifestation of a tradition of alternative spirituality whose origins date back to the Greco-Roman civilisation. This current of thought flows like an underground stream throughout the Christian centuries, and surfaces with the Renaissance occultism known as Rosicrucianism, the 18th century Freemasonry, 19th century spiritualism and theosophy. Today's New Age draws its inspiration mainly from the visions of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), the spiritism of Allan Kardec (1804-1869) and the occultism of Eliphas Levi (1810-1875), the theosophy of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) and the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), the *philosophia perennis* of René Guénon (1885-1951), or the theory of the 'collective unconscious' theorized by Karl Jung[27].

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[24] http://www.onlinegallery.ro/stire/%E2%80%9Esucces-si-stare-de-bine%E2%80%9C-%E2%80%93-conferinta-eveniment-ultimului-deceniu, (accessed on 25 May 2024)

[25] https://www.aisucces.ro/neale-donald-walsch-in-romania/ (accessed on 25 May 2024)

[26] https://www.life-care.com/continut/Stiri/Urmareste-LIVE-„Succes-si-stare-de-bine%E2%80%99%E2%80%99-cu-Neale-Donald-Walsch/K01Z/RO/?tagID=7&entityID=18485, (accessed on 25 May 2024)

[27] Robert Ellwood, *How New is the New Age?* in Gordon Melton, *Perspectives on the New Age,* 1992, pp. 59-67; M.F. James, *Les Precurseurs du Verseau,* Montreal, 1985; Pr. Dan Bădulescu, *Împărăția răului: New Age Originile, istoricul, doctrinele și consecințele sale din perspectivă ortodoxă,* Christiana, 2001, pp. 27-37.

The influence of theosophy and its extensions – anthroposophy and the Arcane School, was decisive for the New Age movement. Helena Blavatskaya asserted that India and the East in general contained esoteric traditions that Europe needed to discover. Theosophy was actually the first movement to introduce Hinduism and Buddhism to the West, popularising in particular the teachings on karma and reincarnation. Blavatskaya claimed that everything she wrote in her books was revealed to her by higher, immortal beings, whom she called the "Masters of the Secret Brotherhood" and with whom she had allegedly come into contact at her residence in the Himalayas[28].

Anthroposophy is a branch of theosophy, founded in 1912 by Rudolf Steiner. He claimed that humans possess all truth and universal wisdom within themselves. The impact of anthroposophy can still be seen today in education (Waldorf schools) and medicine (certain therapies based on plants and minerals)[29]. The *Arcane School,* another branch of theosophy, was founded in 1923 by Alice Bailey (1880-1949). Many of the doctrines of this school are similar to those of theosophy, including the teaching about enlightened masters. Bailey claimed to have been the mouthpiece for a Tibetan Master of the Ancient Wisdom, Djwhal Khul, who telepathically dictated 19 books to her[30]. Alice Bailey spoke of the return of Christ in the

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[28] On theosophy, *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, ed. by Peter Clarke, Routledge, 2006, pp. 564-565; Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America,* Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 56-59. On Elena Blavatsky and her relationship with pagan religions, see Robert Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon. A History of the Modern Pagan Witchcraft,* Oxford, 1999. The author wonders whether the founder of theosophy was a pagan and discovers, surprisingly, that she had great respect for Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity which she placed above Buddhism (p. 19).

[29] „Anthroposophy" in *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, ed. by Peter Clarke, Routledge, 2006, pp. 31-31.

[30]Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America,* Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 64. In Romania, Alice A. Bailey's name has been linked to Elie Dulcu, editor and translator of some of her books. In the 1930s, Bailey long maintained correspondence with Elie Dulcu, to whom she not only gave her personal permission to publish her works, and also contributed to the establishment of the RAM Aninoasa publishing house in Gorj, which issued the books *Conștiința atomului (Consciousness of the Atom)* and *De la intelect la intuiție (From Intellect to Intuition)*; the series was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War. After the events of 1989, Elie Dulcu (at that time 84 years old) managed to resume the series by publishing with Neuron Publishing House in Focșani the translation of the book *Initiation, Human and Solar* (1992). After the death of Elie Dulcu, Luana Publishing House resumed publishing, and issued the volumes *Reapariția lui Christos (The Reappearance of the Christ)* and *Scrisori asupra meditației oculte (Letters on Occult Meditation)* in 2002 and 2004. Some of Bailey's books were published by Cartea Daath Publishing House (*Telepatia şi vehicolul eteric – Telepathy and the Etheric Vehicle*), respectively For You Publishing House.

"new age" (*The Reappearance of the Christ*, Lucis Press, 1948). But he will be Maitreya, a great world teacher, who will establish a new world religion and a new world government[31].

More recently, the term New Age was popularized by American Marilyn Ferguson's best-seller, entitled *The Aquarian conspiracy. Personal and social transformation in the 1980s* (J.P. Tarcher, 1980*).* The main idea of the book is that mankind is in the midst of a planetary revolution, that after an era of darkness and violence, namely the "Piscean age", the "age of Aquarius" will follow, as the age of true liberation of the spirit. Marilyn Ferguson claims that this current is emerging as a conspiracy that has unleashed the fastest cultural movement in history. In her view, Aquarians are defined by their state of mind, by the new way of perceiving relationships between things, by a new consciousness. In 1975, exactly 100 years after the founding of the Theosophical Society, Ferguson founded the "Brain Mind Bulletin" magazine to propagate New Age ideas[32].

The New Age brings the promise of a new era resulting from dramatic transformations in all areas, not just the spiritual, by harnessing the impressive capabilities of the human mind. There is a plethora of physicists, electrical engineers, biologists, neurologists, anthropologists, historians, physicians, who have proposed a new vision on the natural and human sciences. The adoption of New Age ideas in scientific circles was facilitated by the fact that their worldview had long been accepted due to Darwin's evolutionary theory, by attention to hidden spiritual powers or forces of nature, by the development and spread of relativism, by antipathy or indifference to the Christian faith.

New Age is not an organised movement, but rather a set of fluid connections between individuals or organisations, between fans of a particular genre of books or websites. In fact, New Age groups are networked in a similar way to the Internet. New Age is a state of mind, which permeates everything in an insidious manner.

Gordon Melton was among the first to note the "amorphous nature" of the New Age movement and its decentralized character, which discourages any attempt to characterize the movement in a conclusive manner[33]. However, despite its heterogeneity, there are a number of

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[31] Jean Vernette, *Jésus au péril des sectes. Esotérisme, gnoses et nouvelle religiosité,* Paris, Desclée, 1994, pp. 176-177.

[32] Michael York, *The Emerging Network. Sociology of the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements*, Rowman&Littelfield Publishers, 1995, pp. 38-52; Bruno Wurtz, *New Age. Paradigma holistă sau revrăjirea Vărsătorului*, Timișoara, 1994, p. 33

[33] Gordon Melton, *Perspectives on the New Age,* 1992, p. 6; the same opinion with Paul Greer, *The Aquarian Confusion. Conflincting Theologies of the New Age,* "Journal of

invariants. From group to group, magazine to magazine, country to country, we find the same *lingua franca*, the same ideas about the human condition and how it can be transformed[34]. Thus, the New Age set of beliefs and practices is centered around at least three main concerns: the *broadening of consciousness* (a continuous process during which one becomes increasingly aware that he/she is part of a divine whole), *esotericism* which includes astrology, visions, spiritism and other forms of communication with "entities of light" (channeling); *religious syncretism* dominated by elements imported from Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism with their meditation techniques and belief in reincarnation[35].

New Age speaks about a *paradigm shift*. The "Age of Pisces", forcibly identified with Christianity, must soon disappear. The Age of Aquarius will be an "Age of the Spirit" and will coincide with the cosmic age of the final struggle between light and darkness and the planet's unresolved problems (environmental destruction, atomic weapons, catastrophes). It is a "golden age" in which humanity will be reconciled with nature (millennialism). There is no agreement on when exactly the transition from the age of Pisces to the age of Aquarius will occur. Some believe it will be sudden, accompanied by chaos and cataclysms, others believe the transition will be more gradual. Many New Age books present ways to save oneself from a catastrophe, attach maps of safe places where people can find shelter, etc.

One of the well-known New Age authors, José Argüelles, prophesied that the alignment of the planets on 16-17 August 1987 would inaugurate the New Age[36]. This was referred to as "harmonic convergence". Thousands

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Contemporary Religion", vol. 10, no. 2, 1995, p. 151; Wouter Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought,* Leiden, 1996, p. 1. On New Age, *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, ed. by Peter Clarke, Routledge, 2006, pp. 401- 406.

[34] Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement. The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity,* Oxford, 1999, p. 2; Michel Lacroix, *L'ideologie du New Age*, Dominos Flammarion, 1996, p. 8.

[35] Wilhelm Dancă, „New Age sau Era Vărsătorului. Religia postmodernității?", in *Fascinația binelui. Creștinism și postmodernitate,* Sapientia, 2007, pp. 138-166.

[36] Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture,* p. 205; José Argüelles was a Mexican-American author and artist holding a Ph.D in Art History and Aestethics, author of mystical books on the Mayan civilization and the Mayan calendar: *The Mayan Factor: Path Beyond Technology*, Inner Traditions Company, 1987; *Time and the Technosphere*, Inner Traditions Company, 2002. He argued that in 2012 humanity must be prepared for a great change, an unprecedented transition into the next stage of evolution, namely the noosphere, i.e. the attainment of planetary consciousness, an "awakened planetary mind". At the time of his death (2011), Argüelles was the director of the Noosphere II project of

of followers then met on Mount Shatsa, at Machu Picchu in Peru, Chaco Canyon – New Mexico, Stonehenge in England, Sedona – Arizona. Although some participants saw the political changes of the late 1980s as effects of "harmonic convergence", many were still disappointed. The event nevertheless played an important role in New Age millennialism.

New Age also brings about a holistic (Greek ὅλος- whole) or integrative view. Holism emphasizes the importance of the connection between person and society, people and earth, between the world we live in and other worlds[37]. In religious terms, this implies the fact that divinity and creation are inseparable (pantheism). God is spoken of as an "impersonal energy", immanent in the world, cosmic energy present at the core of every being. New Age believers claim that everything we encounter in the universe: animals, humans, plants, minerals, are emanations of the one divine consciousness.

Finally, the New Age endorses the *idea of personal transformation*, which is not simply intellectual change, but emphasises that people must learn to live under this new paradigm. The New Age phrases we often hear - "use your creative power"; "unleash the power of imagination"; "think positive", "broaden your consciousness" – are implemented through a number of techniques that aim to bring about a mutation in consciousness: mantras (ritual invocations) that are continuously recited until habitual mental frames dissolve; various breathing techniques; astral projection, etc. New Age practitioners ignore the fact that consciousness-altering techniques produce drug-like effects, both leading to distorted perceptions, altered perception of time, depersonalisation, euphoria, etc. Personal exploration in New Age culminates with the discovery of ultimate reality – God – *within oneself*. "Remember that you are God" is one of the phrases that appear very often in New Age discourse. The goal of personal transformation in the New Age is therefore human self-divinisation.

The New Age also presents itself as a *religious synthesis* based on several general principles. Firstly, Aquarians maintain that there is no hierarchy between religions, none is superior to another. Secondly, they argue that there is more to religion than simple monotheism, which is why they are particularly interested in Eastern religions. Thirdly, the New Age refuses to confine religion within the bounds of faith, but seek access to spirituality through esoteric initiation. Fourthly, New Age rejects the notion

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the Foundation's Galactic Research Institute (http://www.lawoftime.org/). See Michael York, *op.cit,* pp. 81-85.

[37] On holism, Michel Lacroix, *L'ideologie du New Age*, Dominos Flammarion, 1996, pp. 34-39; Wouter Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture,* pp. 119-120.

of an institutional Church, instead promoting *individual spirituality*, whereby everyone must discover their spiritual and ethical authority within themselves. However, as already mentioned, New Age adherents do have some places they consider sacred. One of these is Mount Shasta in the United States, where the remains of lost civilisations such as Atlantis or Lemuria are believed to lie. Many New Age pilgrims who travel there claim to have seen mysterious lights, angel-shaped clouds or flying saucers. It's one of the areas where great spiritual powers are believed to be concentrated[38].

Some of the New Age currents or groups speak of divinity in terms of individual experience, while others refer to a Life Force, a Creative Energy, or simply Love. In neither case in the New Age can we encounter a personal God, but a force or energy very close to the Hindu concept of Brahma[39]. As we know, Brahma is the impersonal force of existence itself, the creative power of the universe, the absolute in which Brahmins sought to immerse themselves through meditation. As absolute being, he is one with the world that emanates from him. Brahma fills the world and the world is contained within him[40]. God is a subject of experience rather than faith. For this reason, any discussion on the nature of God in the New Age really boils down to describing the personal experience of encountering the divine.

New Age followers do not speak of the divine-human person of the Saviour Jesus Christ, but of "Christ Consciousness", a state of complete enlightenment, love and compassion to which all human beings should aspire. Jesus of Nazareth had developed this consciousness in himself, encouraging people to do the same. Many New Age followers believe that Jesus attained this consciousness during his alleged journey to the Far East where he became one of the "enlightened masters", an elite group who are in the astral sphere and guide people to achieve "self-awareness". But St. John the Apostle and Evangelist makes it clear that "Every spirit that does not confess Jesus Christ is not of God" (I John 4:3).

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[38] Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America,* p. 33.

[39] Wouter Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture,* pp. 183-189.

[40] On Brahmanism, the second stage of Indian religion, spanning between the Vedic period and the rise of Buddhism, see Deacon Prof. Emilian Vasilescu, *Istoria religiilor,* Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1982, pp. 205-215. According to Father Vasilescu, it is about "a philosophical abstraction elevated to the status of god" and that this is why Brahma could not become a popular god, he remained the intellectual deity of the Brahmins, p. 207).

New Age spirituality claims that all humans are divine.[41] The only difference between man and the "New Age god" is that man has not yet attained Christ consciousness and realized his unlimited potential. Thus, in the New Age view, the purpose of human life is to awaken the "god" in man[42]. A natural consequence of man proclaiming himself to be God is that he no longer accepts the notion of sin or the need for salvation[43]. Personal transformation in the New Age ultimately destroys the notion of personhood, because in pursuing a Promethean dream, man becomes depersonalized. Christian teaching places the God-Man Jesus Christ at its centre and affirms that man, aware of his individuality, limitations and finitude, experiences a relationship with a personal God and is in dialogue with Him.

In fact, the major difference between Christianity and New Age teachings is the relationship between the "inner god" and "theosis". Theosis, i.e. the state of deification of the man permeated by divine energies[44], is not achieved solely through our own efforts, but through our cooperation with God's grace and by accepting the fact that we are creatures, beings subject to sin, and in no way by exacerbating the self. The words of St. Athanasius the Great, "God became man that man might become god" can in no way be deemed to support New Age ideas. What does attaining deification, theosis, actually mean? Theosis does not mean that the essence of our human nature is lost, abolished, depersonalized. On the contrary, there is the possibility of the believer's real, authentic and mystical union with God through which we move from corruption to incorruption, from death to life.

One of the most important aspects of the New Age movement is, without a doubt, the phenomenon known as *channeling* or "New Age spiritualism"[45]. It is common knowledge that the history of classical

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[41] Wouter Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought,* Leiden, 1996, pp. 204- 211.

[42] „Man will become whatever he thinks within himself, for he is the God hidden under the guise of mankind" (*Ghidul începătorului pentru crearea realității. O introducere în învățăturile lui Ramtha,* p. 103).

[43] „God is a convenient image in heaven, because as long as He is there, He will punish you for your sins...And when you want to be saved, you want someone to be able to save you. Do you know why? Because you don't think you are able do it yourselves." (*Ibidem,* p. 121).

[44] Pr.Dr. Ion Stoica, *Adevărul, lumea și omul,* ASA, Bucharest, 2006, p. 97.

[45] On channeling, see Jean Vernette, *op.cit*, pp. 98-113;. *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, pp. 391-392; Suzanne Riordan, *Channeling: A New Revelation?,* in *Perspective son the New Age,* pp. 105- 126; Wouter Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture,* pp. 23-41; Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America,*

spiritualism begins with Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) who described his alleged spiritual experiences, including visiting heaven and hell under the guidance of Christ himself[46]. Spiritualism was theorized by the French Allain Kardec (1804-1869), whose books are available in esoteric bookstores in Romania[47], and became a mass phenomenon in mid-19th century America. Allain Kardec affirmed the existence of an impersonal god, of spirits who evolve and perfect themselves through reincarnation, the possibility of dialogue between these spirits and the living, the fact that the planets of the universe are inhabited.

The history of modern *channeling* begins with Shirley McLaine (b. 1934), a well-known American actress, sister of actor Waren Beatty, who in the 1980s described her experiences in several international best-selling books: *Out on a Limb*, *Dancing in the Light*, and *It's All in the Playing*, *Sage-ing While Age-ing*.

At first glance, channeling is no different from classical spiritism. Spiritism, speculating on the natural grief of those who have lost a loved one, promises a closer connection with those who have departed this life, claiming to be able to broker conversations between the living and the dead and even direct physical contact in "seances". Aquarian followers claim that they "tune in" to the universal world consciousness and that during trance ("channeling"), another entity takes control of their personality. This entity may belong to extinct civilisations, may be an extraterrestrial entity, an angel, etc. Actually, the purposes of the two phenomena, spiritism and channeling, are completely different. Spiritism confined itself to communicating with the afterlife, in order to offer some comfort to the living persons who had lost a loved one; channeling aims at the personal transformation of clients in preparation for the "new age"; spiritual entities are invoked in the hope of being able to exercise better control over one's own life and career.

Channeling has been defined as "the process of receiving information from a dimension other than that which we can understand through the senses"[48]. For a phenomenon to be termed *channeling*, three

p. 24; Massimo Introvigne, *Il channeling: uno spiritismo moderno?* in CESNUR, *Lo Spiritismo,* a cura di Massimo Introvigne, Editrice Elle Di Ci, 1989, pp. 35-96.

[46] Serafim Rose, *Sufletul după moarte. Experiențe contemporane „de după moarte" în lumina învățăturii ortodoxe,* Sofia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, pp. 111-115; Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America,* pp. 48-49.

[47] *Cartea Mediumilor*, Pro Editura, 2006 (republished 2008); *Cartea Spirtelor*, Herald Publishing House, 2007.

[48] Jon Klimo, *Channeling. Investigations on Receiving Infromation for Paranormal Sources,* Jeremy Tarcher, Los Angeles, 1987, p. 345.

elements are required: a receiving channel (medium), a transmitting entity and a message. During the trance, the medium may be in a state of complete dissociation from reality, later claiming not to remember what had been happening, or may be in a partial trance in which they experience the channeling like an external witness. There are also cases that do not involve trance and in which the medium hears voices dictating messages to be written or in which the hand automatically writes certain messages. Finally, channeling can be spontaneous or induced. In the first case, the medium is at the disposal of entities who grant revelations. In the second case, the medium is in control of the phenomenon and can even cause it, using certain techniques that can be learned, or fraud may simply be involved, as Dr. Margaret Singer Thaler pointed out[49].

In recent years, esoteric bookstores in Romania have published messages received by various mediums from the country or abroad. Although much of the information is trivial, contradictory and confusing, there are certain common characteristics and themes. Overall, this kind of literature examines the human condition and claims to hold solutions as to how mankind should discover its true destiny. Entities address us seeking to convince us that reality is illusory and that we create our reality; that our self is divine and that we must awaken and become aware of our divine nature. All this is presented in a language of love and light, which deceives and entices many people[50].

One of the normative New Age texts and a classic example of channeling is *A Course in Miracles*, which also appeared in Romanian translation[51]. In 1965, an American psychologist of Jewish origin, Helen Schucman, an avowed atheist with an interest in paranormal phenomena, claimed to hear a voice repeating over and over again, “This is a course in miracles. Please take notes.” And the voice dictated the “new gospel” to her. Schucman set up the “Foundation for Inner Peace” that the various study groups of the course began to attend. The main ideas put forth in this book

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[49] Margaret Singer Thaler, *Cults in our Midst. The hidden Menace in our everyday Lives*, 1995, pp. 162-163.

[50] *Ghidul începătorului pentru crearea realității. O introducere în învățăturile lui Ramtha,* pp.179-180: „I love you. How can I do it? Because I give myself to you and because you are the reason why I have materialized in this way. And what is there to love about you? What I was. You are Gods who have totally forgotten it. You are in a state of amnesia, forgetting your divinity. I salute the God within you.”

[51] Vernette, *op.cit*, pp. 108-110; Suzanne Riordan, *Channeling: A New Revelation* in *Perspective son the New Age,* pp. 116-118; Wouter Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, pp. 37-38; the translated Course in Miracles/ *Cursul de miracole* was issued by the "Foundation for Inner Peace" in 2008, selling at the price (prohibitive in our opinion) of 185 RON.

are: God is an impersonal spirit; creation is an emanation of his being; man is a "fragment" of the only Son of God; there is no death, but a mistaken belief in the reality of death; Jesus Christ did not die for our sins, He is not the Son of God, but the first to possess self-consciousness, existential consciousness, etc.

As Orthodox Christians, we should be amazed at the ease with which our fellow Christians so readily put their trust in visions and signs of all kinds. Father Seraphim Rose noted that "spiritual" experiences and spirit apparitions have become perhaps more frequent today than at any time in Christian history, and an easily deluded humanity is ready to accept the theory of a "new age" of spiritual miracles or a "new outpouring of the Holy Spirit" to explain such phenomena without questioning whether demonic deceptions lie behind them[52]. Moreover, there are New Age authors who consider channeling to be a universal phenomenon that can be found in all religions, including the New Testament prophets, and tatements of this kind have unfortunately also been taken up in academia[53].

As a scion of gnosticism, theosophy and spiritualism, the belief in reincarnation could not be missing from the New Age mosaic. In the Eastern understanding of the term, reincarnation is the process of continuous rebirth until the soul reaches a state of perfection and merges again with its source (God, or the Universal Soul, the All, the Infinite). The concept of reincarnation is closely related to that of *karma*, which refers to the fortune accumulated by a soul through good or bad deeds committed during the present or past lives. Our present existence, happy or unhappy, and our social status are the result of our past lives[54].

Hypnotic (past life) regression, as a modern method of demonstrating reincarnation, consists of bringing the subject into a trance-like state, turning back in time several decades or centuries, while asking them to describe all these experiences. According to scientific studies, "memories" refreshed through hypnosis are dependent on the knowledge one possesses at the time. When hypnotising groups of patients who described their past experiences, it was found that all they reported as past lives were scenes from a novel they had read long before, from a film they had previously watched, or were simply episodes in the experiences of friends or acquaintances. However, there are also cases where a spontaneous recollection of past lives occurs. Certain persons, usually children, provide details about people and events from the past, from a completely different

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[52] Serafim Rose, *Sufletul după moarte,* p. 79.
[53] Wouter Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism*, p. 26.
[54] E. Vasilescu, *Istoria Religiilor*, p. 209-201; Jean Vernette, *op.cit*, pp. 113-122.

geographical area, information that they could not normally have and which turns out to be true after investigation, and this misleads many people.

There is a significant difference between the concept of reincarnation, as it was developed in the East, and that promoted by the New Age, which has reached us via theosophical and anthroposophical texts. Reincarnation was one of Rudolf Steiner's favourite topics. He also had a particular vision of the Incarnation of the Saviour Christ, claiming that in He takes upon Himself and resolves the cosmic consequences of all our faults, that He gives everyone the strength to overcome the burden of their karma[55]. It was Helena Blavatsky who popularised this concept in the West, including it in her *Theosofical Glossary* (1892). As formulated in New Age terms, reincarnation is a belief designed to make one aware that one is a part of the cosmos, that each of us is only a link in the chain of life, that the same energy animates man and all living beings around him. Living a new life on earth is no longer considered an expiation of sins or offences, as in classical Hinduism and Buddhism, but a freely assumed opportunity for progress, a new spiritual step towards improved, deeper knowledge of the eternal truths.

In general terms, there is a great difference between the final state reached by the person in Hinduism and Christianity, respectively. Hindus believe that when one attains perfection one is freed from personhood, through full identification with Brahman – the absolute and impersonal god. Man's individual existence is annihilated, absorbed into the ocean of impersonal divinity. Therefore, he will never be born again, because he has ceased to even exist as such. Christian belief is exactly the opposite. The human person exists eternally, and will never know an end. In this life, man consciously enters into a personal relationship with the Personal God, a relationship that will abide in eternity. By keeping Christ's commandments, by partaking of His Body and Blood, man is united with God through grace, becomes "God by grace", and in this way participates eternally, as a distinct person, in the Life of God. Christian perfection consists in attaining this personal communion with God. This is man's destiny in eternity.

The Orthodox Church, and the Christian Church in general, firmly rejects the doctrine of reincarnation for several reasons. Firstly, it creates an artificial separation between body and soul, then it denies the resurrection of bodies, downplays salvation and ignores the uniqueness of the person in creation. Reincarnation asserts that the human body is of secondary importance, since only the soul survives death.

Reincarnation denies the Divine Providence and nullifies the necessity of the Incarnation of God's Logos, of His Sacrifice and

[55] Jean Vernette, *op.cit*, pp. 116-128; pp. 145-146.

Resurrection. A Christian who believes in reincarnation cannot believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God, who took human flesh with all its weaknesses. Likewise, where there is belief in reincarnation, there is no belief in the Resurrection. However, we profess the belief that Saviour Jesus Christ rose from the dead with His transfigured body, that He afterwards appeared before the apostles in the body, and allowed them to touch Him. If reincarnation existed, there would be no need for resurrection. *He who believes in me has eternal life... And I will raise him up on the last day... I am the Resurrection and the Life...*[56]. If humans could achieve perfection through reincarnation, then salvation would no longer come by God's grace. (Ephesians II, 8-10). Whoever believes in reincarnation, believes that one reaches salvation on one's own, and therefore no longer needs Christ.

Many New Age followers believe that the Saviour Jesus Christ and the early Church taught reincarnation, but that the Council of Nicaea rejected this doctrine[57]. It is known that the Council of Nicaea, which is amply documented by historians, theologians and philologists, and whose proceedings and decrees have been published, did not address the issue of reincarnation. Moreover, proponents of reincarnation attempt to anchor this concept in the Holy Scripture. Several biblical texts are cited by the advocates of reincarnation: the healing of the man blind since birth (John XIX, 2-3), St. John the Baptist, whom the Saviour said was Elijah who was to come (Mt. XI, 11-14), the conversation with Nicodemus (John III, 3). The Epistle to the Hebrews IX, 27-28 clearly states that man dies once, and after that follows the judgment: „And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many;

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[56] „The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (John V, 28-29); „Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: and if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain…. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." (I Cor. XV, 12-22); „But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come? Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain…. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption" (I Cor. XV,12-42); „For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God" (Job XIX, 25).

[57] Wouter Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, p. 321.

and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.”.

I was surprised to learn that, according to sociological surveys conducted in the year 2000, 28% of the Romanian population believed in reincarnation. This is one of the highest percentages in Europe, exceeded only by the Baltic States, with more than 30% of the population believing in reincarnation. It seemed to me a teaching so foreign to the Orthodox Christian faith, so alien to the culture and mentality of the Romanian people, that it was impossible for it to be appropriated.

And yet, what is it that makes our people believe in reincarnation? In my opinion, it is firstly a spiritual trend: the secularized man is simply looking for “trendy” beliefs to replace old beliefs and convictions. Secondly, this notion seems to respond to certain eschatological concerns that the Church has not adequately insisted upon. Belief in reincarnation seems to provide the antidote to the fear of death, eternal torment and the end of the world. Apparently, death is accepted with more serenity because it is regarded merely as a passage to another life on this earth, and the notion of hell is abolished. Even the end of the world is no longer dreaded, since the universe is cyclical. Unfortunately, certain thought currents, old and new in the Church, have paved the way for the acceptance of this belief. In particular, the idea of “universal salvation”, which is found in various forms among many contemporary Christian theologians, renders the concept of salvation very vague[58].

4. Conclusion

The New Age and its spirituality have been very successful in Europe for decades. Its influence is growing in the former communist countries, and, as we have seen, it is also re-appearing in Romania. Its success is due to its rather vague characteristics, lack of attachment to an institution or dogma, and numerous offshoots capable of satisfying all tastes. The New Age is insidiously infiltrating all fields through seemingly harmless means, from universities to economics, politics, ecology, human rights, and actions to combat poverty. New Age movements and currents plead for non-violence, peace, health, saving the planet, healthy lifestyles, chemical-free farming, and the and the prohibition of nuclear weapons, which deceives many Christians. The appearance of peace and love that the new-age-ist messages seem to convey actually hides the ambition to build a new totalitarian world order.

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[58] Radu Petre Mureșan, *Atitudinea Bisericilor Tradiționale Europene față de prozelitismul advent.* pp. 557-563.

A closer look reveals that the New Age embodies nothing else than the promises made by the serpent to Eve. “You shall not die,” said the serpent, and the New Age affirms the existence of an eternal being in every human who has the ability to reproduce infinitely by reincarnation in new bodies; “Your eyes shall be opened and you will know good and evil," and the New Age points out that there is an inner eye in every human being that meditation practices and psychology techniques open, so that man can attain supreme knowledge; “You shall be like God," and the New Age proposes techniques of developing human potential, through which man believes he is attaining divine perfection, self-deification.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEOPAGANISM

1. Neopaganism: an overview.

The term "pagan" comes from the Latin *paganus*, by which the Christians of early centuries designated the Greco-Roman polytheists. It is therefore the name given by Christians to a population that had not been evangelised or did not wish to accept the Gospel. The term Neo-Paganism is used in academic circles to emphasise the discontinuity between pre-Christian and present-day paganism. The suffix "neo" in this case underlines the recent character, the contemporary aspect of this movement, adapted to the present-day context[59]. Most adherents of neo-paganism, however, reject the designation because, they argue, just as Christians today do not call themselves neo-Christians just because they live in a different historical era, similarly they deem themselves continuators of the ancient pagans.

The relationship between neo-paganism and indigenous peoples is problematic. At first glance, today's indigenous people (Native Americans, Africans, Australian Aborigines), can also be called pagans because they are nature-oriented and have resisted conversion by Christian missionaries. Moreover, neo-pagans look up to Hinduism as an ancient religion that has survived into modern times and could not be replaced or diluted despite the efforts of Muslim conquerors or Christian settlers[60]. Certain experts propose a distinction between paganism and Paganism, namely: paganism (lowercase) designates all religions that have resisted conversion to

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[59] H. Maurier, „Paganisme", *Dictionnaire des religions* ed. Paul Poupard, Presses Universitaires de France, 1984, pp. 1485-1488 ; *Encyclopedia of New Religions. New Religious Movements. Sects and Alternative Spiritualities,* edited by Christopher Patridge, Lion Hudson, 2004, p. 269; *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, ed. by Peter Clarke, Routledge, 2006, pp. 396-397; On the etymology of the term neopagan and its different meanings see also Robert Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon. A History of the Modern Pagan Witchcraft,* Oxford, 1999, p. 4; Michael Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures,* pp. 4-13.

[60] Not coincidentally, WCER has intensified its contacts with Hindu representatives is no coincidence. In February 2003 Romuva members attended a meeting of Hindu elders in Bombay, followed by a joint conference in 2003 in New Jersey. The 2006 WCER Congress was also held in Jaipur, India. According to Jean Francois-Mayer, the well-known Swiss expert on New Religious Movements, these encounters between pagan spiritual quests and other ethnic religious traditions are a fascinating example of religious globalisation, and analysts of the geopolitics of religions need to closely follow this phenomenon. (Jean-Francois Mayer, *Le neo-paganisme rencontre la mondialisation. A propos de deux récentes ouvrages en français,* „Religioscope", 21 août, 2003 (http://www.religioscope.info/article_201.shtml).

monotheism, both historical and contemporary groups, while Paganism (spelled with capital letter) refers to those who were brought up in monotheism, but have renounced it in favour of pre-Christian traditions[61].

There is a wide variety of traditions and beliefs in the broad spectrum of what we call neo-paganism. Some neo-pagans worship multiple gods and goddesses, others focus on a single, impersonal, genderless life force, and still others worship a cosmic couple, the god and goddess. Contrary to monotheistic religions, Neo-Paganism does not posit that divinity is one or omniscient, nor that it created the world. Like humans, gods are creations, emanations of the world in which they manifest. Neo-Pagan deities are both male and female, embodying notions as diverse as wisdom, war, fertility and death[62].

Neo-Paganism does not appear as a unitary movement, either in terms of rituals or in terms of lifestyle. However, Neo-Pagans subscribe to several common tenets: acceptance of the masculine and feminine (even androgynous) principle of the Divine; respect for and communion with nature, often pantheistic deification of nature; respect for the life force of the universe and the endless cycles of life and death; each individual is responsible for discovering his or her own path, in harmony with the outside world and the community. This idea is usually expressed by the motto: "Do as you please, as long as you don't hurt anyone".

The cycles of nature are very important to Pagans, with the lunar cycles and festivals of the seasons ordering the lives of most of them. In the pagan calendar, the so-called 'Wheel of the Year', there are eight major seasonal festivals, called sabbats: Samhain (October 1), the winter solstice (December 21), Imbolc (February 2), the spring equinox (March 21), Beltane (May 1), the summer solstice (June 24), Lammas (August 1), and

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[61] Barbara Jane Davy, *Introduction to pagan Studies,* Alta Mira Press, 2007, p. 2; Joane Pearson (ed), *Belief Beyond Boundaries: Wicca, Celtic Spirituality and the New Age*, Ashgate, 2002, p. 16. One of the most important studies dedicated to Neo-Paganism is authored by journalist Margot Adler, *Drawing the moon. Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Order Pagans in America Today,* 1979. Two important works are Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon. A History of Modern pagan Witchraft,* 1999 and especially the study by Helen Berger, *A Community of Witches.*

[62] *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe.* Vol VI: *The Twenty Century.* Edited by Bengt Anakarloo and Stuart Clark, University of Pennylvania Press, 1999, pp. 21- 26 ("The Godness and God of Modern Paganism"); Michael, York, *Pagan Theology,* pp. 35-41 (chapter „Pagan Deities and the Principle of the Cosmic Ortder"); Barbara Jane Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies,* pp. 13-32.

the autumn equinox (September 21)[63]. Imbolc reminds people that the day is growing longer and winter will soon pass. It is customary for Pagans to light candles, a symbol of the growing light. Beltane is an exuberant holiday, celebrating sexuality and fertility. The divine masculine and feminine energies come together in this month, and the fruits of this union are the harvest, and life in general. Because May was dedicated to the performing of this divine marriage, marriages between humans were discouraged (hence the notion that it is "not good" to marry in May). Lammas marks the beginning of the harvest season and is celebrated with festivals, games and competitions. Pieces of bread and the first fruits of the harvest are also distributed after being blessed. Samhain marks the end of the pagan new year, the honouring of ancestors, the encounter with death. On this night the dead are believed to return and visit the living. Pagans encourage these visits by invoking their names and memory. Samhain is still present today in the collective subconscious in the celebration of the dead – Halloween[64].

Neo-Pagan identity is also expressed in festivals, music and dance[65]. There are regional, cross-regional and international festivals, during which followers gather in parks, forests or other places under the open sky. Other pagan activities are individual and are conducted at home with the family. Sacrifice is a very rare practice in modern paganism. Instead, offerings of bread, cakes, fruit and flowers are very common. Invocations can be either spontaneous or standard formulations available online and in the neo-pagan literature (magazines).

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[63] On the „Wheel of the year", see Joyce and River Higginbolham, *An Introduction to Earth-Centerd Religion,* Fourth Printing, 2004, pp. 16-23; Barbara Jane Davy, *op.cit,* pp. 56-59.

[64] Karen Sue Hybertsen, *Twisting Space. Women, Spirits and Halloween* in Lesly A. Northup (ed.), *Women and Religious Ritual,* Washington CD, 1993, pp. 37-49. The author notes that three traditions have merged into Halloween: the Celtic ritual of Samhain, the festival of the Roman goddess Pomona, celebrated with fruit and nuts, and the Christian traditions of the Feast of All Saints. Philippe Walter notes that in 998 an abbot of Cluny instituted for the first time the commemoration of the dead or "day of the dead" on 2 November. (*Mitologie creştină. Sărbători, ritualuri şi mituri din Evul Mediu,* Editura Artemis, 2005, p. 41-59, p. 42). Halloween was the setting of a popular American film production by Tommy Lee Wallace (*Halloween III. Season of the Witch*, 1982). Also on Halloween, ET the creature of Steven Spielberg's eponymous film arrived on Earth. (*E.T. The Extra-Terestrial*, 1982).

[65] Sarah M. Pike, *Earthly bodies, magical selves: contemporary pagans and the search for community*, Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press , 2001, p. 5; Idem, *New Age and neopagan religions in America,* New York ; Chichester : Columbia University Press, 2004.

The most important neo-pagan rituals are related to birth, coming of age or marriage and differ from one group to another. A typical ritual involves preparing the participants, creating a sacred space, invoking deities and energies, and the actual magic ritual. Pagans don't have predetermined places, but create their space at each meeting. In order to prepare the place, they sprinkle salt, or scorch the grass to create a circle. Preparation is achieved through meditation, listening to music, mere silence, ritual ablutions. Often a sacred place is created by drawing a circle, with participants sitting also in a circle to emphasise their equality. The most common symbol of Neo-Paganism is the five-pointed star, symbolising the five elements that sustain life on earth: earth, sky, fire, water, spirit[66].

There are two principles characteristic of the different forms of neo-paganism. Most neo-pagans believe that all parts of the universe, animate and inanimate, are interconnected at levels beyond the limits of space and time as we know them. Humans, they argue, can interact with the universe and the divine as co-creators. This is the principle of interconnectedness. Another principle is that every part of the universe is blessed and there is nothing wrong or bad, either in the universe or in the human person. It goes without saying that no pagan group accepts the idea of sin and none promotes the idea of salvation[67].

Neo-pagan groups can be divided into two broad categories. On the one hand, there are groups that seek to reconstruct the old religions of a particular ethnic or linguistic group or geographical area. On the other hand, there are those that freely mix traditions from different areas, different ancient peoples and different historical periods. These two attitudes can be generically termed Reconstructionism and Eclecticism. Obviously, this eclecticism-reconstructionism polarity simplifies things for methodological reasons. In reality, no pagan movement can absolutely be placed in one of these categories.

Reconstructionists study ancient texts, folklore, archaeology, all sources likely to provide information about traditional religions, try to keep up with academic research and sometimes are researchers themselves. It cannot be said that Reconstructionists do not take the liberty to adopt their own interpretations, but they regard the old traditions as authoritative and authentic. The Paganism currently found in Greece is an example of Reconstructionism. Eclecticists are not so fond of the past, they see it only as a source of inspiration, and feel free to adopt European and non-European deities, to combine them on the basis of what they consider to be similar or

[66] Joyce and River Higginbolham, *An Introduction to Earth-Centerd Religion,* pp. 30-38.
[67] Barbara Jane Davy, *Introduction to pagan Studies,* Alta Mira Press, 2007, p. 29.

complementary. Wicca is the best known example of pagan eclecticism. Reconstructionism is more common in Central and Eastern Europe, where ethnic culture and identity remain important organizing principles of social life and cultural activity, while eclectic neo-paganism is prevalent in the British Isles and North America where identity is less emphasized[68].

Neo-Pagans generally do not accept the idea of conversion. They claim that they do not convert once they join a group (coven), but confirm their identity, i.e. reaffirm the old beliefs[69]. Most scholars accept that there are no accounts of conversion in pagan discourse and that paganism is "discovered" as a result of interest in ecology, pagan monuments, occult books. Most scholars accept that there are no accounts of conversion in pagan discourse and that paganism is "discovered" as a result of interest in ecology, pagan monuments, occult books. When they meet people with similar concerns, all potential Pagans become aware of their identity and realise that they are "coming home"[70].

Despite the fact that there are many kinds of paganism and also individuals professing paganism, there are some important traditions that are usually the focus of researchers. These are: Wicca, Druidism, Neo-shamanism, Odinism (Nordic paganism)[71]. Wicca, or neo-pagan witchcraft, is arguably the best known form of neo-paganism, by some estimates, with almost half of all pagans being wiccans. It is the classic example of eclecticism within Paganism, a "spiritual bric-a-brac" in which elements

[68] On Reconstructionism and Eclectism, see Michael York, *Pagan Theology. Paganism as a World Religion,* New York University Press, 2003, pp. 18-20.

[69] Joyce and River Higginbolham, *An Introduction to Earth-Centerd Religion,* p. 4, state that unlike members of other religions, pagans do not actively proselytise. They don't send missionaries, they don't try to convert. Almost none of the Pagans the authors knew had converted to Paganism in the traditional sense. They became pagans by deciding that paganism reflected what they already believed and adopted the term paganism to describe themselves.

[70] Graham Harvey, *Coming Home and Coming Out Pagan but not Converting* în Christopher Lamb and Darrol Bryant (ed.)*, Religious Conversion. Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, London: Cassell, 1999, pp. 233-246; Sian Reid, *„A Religion Without Converts" Revisited: Individuals, Identity and Community in Contemporary Paganism* în *Handbook of Contemporay Paganism,* pp. 171-194.

[71] *Encyclopedia of New Religions,* edited by Christopher Patridge, pp. 277-280; Jenny Butler, *Druidry in Contemporary Ireland,* în Michael Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*, pp. 87-126; "Celtic Traditions" in Michael York, *Pagan Theology.* pp. 90-98; Michael Strmiska, Baldur A Sigurvinsson, *Asastru. Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America*, in Michael Strmiska (ed.) *Modern Paganism in World Cultures.* pp. 127-180.

from other pre-Christian religions are integrated, in particular elements from Celtic, Greek and Roman cults[72].

The founder of the modern Wicca movement is the Englishman Gerald Gardner (1884-1964), a Freemason, Rosicrucian, member of the *Ordo Templi Orientis* and other secret societies.[73] Because British law imposed restrictions on witchcraft, Gardner could not make his writings and opinions public until 1951, when the practice of witchcraft became legal, as long as it did not harm another person. Gardner immediately published two works, *Witchcraft Today* (1951) and *The Meaning of the Witchcraft* (1959), which were unexpectedly successful in England and had great impact in America. In doing so, *he did not revive an old religion, as he believed, but created a new one*. His sources of inspiration were the ideas of Alistar Crowely or popular works such as James Georges Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (*The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*, New York, 1890)[74]. There are currently around 120,000 avowed followers of Wicca in England. The best-known Wiccan voices in Europe are Janet Farrar, Vivianne Crowley, Marian Green, who act as female 'gurus' for neo-pagan followers[75].

In the 1960s, Wicca was "exported" to America and became popular a few years later with the publication of Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon. Witches, Druids, Goddess' Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today* (New York, 1979). The main novelty of the American

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[72] Joyce and River Higginbolham, *An Introduction to Earth-Centerd Religion,* p. 8; *Encyclopedia of New Religions,* edited by Christopher Patridge, pp. 295-297; Joane Pearson (ed), *Belief Beyond Boundaries,* chapter „Witches and Wicca", pp. 133-172.

[73] On Gerlad Gardner and his followers, see *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, pp. 43-55; Nevill Drury, *The Modern Magical revival,* in *Handbook of Contemporay Paganism,* edited by Murphy Pizza and James Lewis, Leiden, 2009, pp. 50-63.

[74] James Lewis, *Witchcraft Today. An Encyclopedia of Wiccan and Neopagan Traditions*, California, 1999 (Chapter "Precursors to Modern Witchcraft", pp. XIV-XIX). *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe. The Twenth Century.* p. 2, stating that 20th century pagan witchcraft is the only religion England can claim to have given the world.

[75] Janet Farrar published one of the most influential books on witchcraft: *The Pagan Path* (co-author Gavin Bone, Custer, 1995), *Progressive Witchcraft. Spirituality, Mysteries and Training in Modern Wicca* (co-author Gavin Bone, 2004). Vivianne Crowley is a university lecturer at King's Kollege London and high priestess of the Wiccan religion, secretary of PFI since 1988. On of its major works is *Wicca. The Old religion in the New Age*, Wellingborough, Aquarian, 1989, which explains to readers how Wicca is practiced in her coven. Marian Green is the author of more than 20 books on magic and withcraft addressing mostly those who want to engage in magic individually, rather as members of a coven.

version is feminism, promoted through the books of radical feminists like Starhawk[76] or Zsuzsanna Budapest[77].

It is important to note in this context that Wicca followers value feminist theories according to which in the medieval period, some 9 million women accused of witchcraft became victims of the Inquisition. A comparison is thus made between the 6 million victims of the Holocaust, and the 9 million alleged victims of the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, in a deliberate attitude of victimhood[78]. To modern-times witches, this myth is so important that they consider themselves direct heirs to the body of knowledge of those ancient witches.

However, modern witchcraft differs from what the former, old one. First of all, it has lost the sense of sacrifice, as if the deities worshipped, the same as in ancient times, have adjusted to the modern world and no longer demand atoning sacrifices. It is par excellence a „religion"' of mysteries, without sacred places and clearly prescribed acts of worship, it is selective and exclusivistic, with a minimal theoretical structure. In a Wicca group there can be as many interpretations of divinity as there are members. The most important function of modern witchcraft is to provide the means by which people can experience the divine directly. Contemporary witchcraft also plays an important role in the „war between the genders", as it emphasises the idea of a free and strong woman. The goddess symbolises

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[76] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance, A rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Godness,* San Francisco ; London, Harper & Row, 1979. Starhawk is an American writer, self-proclaimed anarchist activist, theorist of paganism, and one of the best-known voices of ecofeminism and the struggle against globalization. On her, Cynthia Eller, *Twentieth-Century Womens Religions as Seen in the Feminist Spiritual Movement*, pp. 180-181Ecofeminism is a political and cultural movement that emphasizes the common ground between feminism and the environment, arguing that there is a strong analogy between the oppression and subordination of women in the family and society on the one hand, and the degradation of nature on the other. (See *Encyclopedia of New Religions,* ed. by Christopher Partridge, p. 384). Starhawk also has her own website: http://www.starhawk.org/

[77] Zsuzsanna Budapest, *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries*, London, 1990. Budapest is a representative of separatist feminism, accepting no men in the coven. She also makes no compromise with Christianity and makes sarcastic remarks about the Saviour. See Cynthia Eller, *Twentieth-Century Women's Religions as Seen in the Feminist Spiritual Movement* in Catherine Wessinger (ed.), *Women's Leadership in marginal religions. Explorations outside the mainstream,* University of Illinois, 1993, pp. 178-179.

[78] Andrea Dworkin is the first feminist writer to equate the burnings at the stake of Middle Ages with a genocide (*Human Hating,* New York, Dutton, 1974). Then Mary Daly published *GynEcology. The metaethics of radical feminism,* Boston (Mass.), Beacon Press, 1978 where she stated that the persecution against witches had actually been a covert persecution of women. Pearson, Joane (ed), *Belief Beyond Boundaries*, p.163.

the recognition of the legitimacy of women's power, or is even the power within women.

The Holy Scripture explicitly condemns sorcery[79]. King Saul was punished for asking a medium to summon the spirit of Samuel: „So Saul died for his transgression which he committed against the Lord, even against the word of the Lord, which he kept not, and also for asking counsel of one that had a familiar spirit, to enquire of it; And enquired not of the Lord; therefore He slew him, and turned the kingdom unto David, the son of Jesse", says the author of the First Book of Chronicles (X, 13-14). St. John Chrysostom, in his homilies "On Lazarus", explains why the dead do not reveal themselves to the living: "Let us not ask the dead to speak to us of those things of which the Scriptures teach us more clearly every day. Do not seek, he says, to learn from the mouths of the dead the truths which the Scriptures give us every day with much greater clarity. Indeed, if the living had availed themselves of the resurrection of the dead, God would not have disregarded, nor would he have left out of so great a gain"[80].

Researchers agree that today's paganism is nothing like the paganism before the rise of Christianity[81]. In fact, it is no more than 150-200 years old, dating from *fin de siècle* England[82]. This is the time when Darwin launched his evolutionary theory, with a critical attitude to the Bible, and generally a period of spiritual and psychological exploration. In this context, a number of societies that claimed to be supra-religious emerged; the best

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[79] Leviticus 19.31: „Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them: I am the Lord your God"; 20, 6: „And the soul that turneth after such as have familiar spirits, and after wizards, to go a whoring after them, I will even set my face against that soul, and will cut him off from among his people."; Deuteronomy 18, 10-14: „There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord: and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee"; Isaiah 8, 19-20: „And when they say to you, "Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter," should not a people seek their God? *Should they seek* the dead on behalf of the living?"

[80] Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilii la săracul Lazăr*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2005, p. 99.

[81] Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the British Isles*, Blackwell, 1991, p. 337, states that Paganism today has nothing in common with what it was in the past, except the name, which is given by Christianity; Stephane Francois, *Le neo-paganisme. Une vision du monde en plein essor,* p. 20, states that contemporary paganism or neo-paganism has little to do with ancient paganism: it is heir to pantheism and romanticism.

[82] On the history and evolution of pagan ideas in Europe, see Joane Pearson,(ed), *Belief Beyond Boundaries*, pp. 15-54.

known is the *Theosophical Society*, founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891).

Today we can speak of a "cultural paganism", which is reflected in a number of academic works, and which attempts to downplay or even deny the role of Christianity in the development of European culture[83]. According to their theories, paganism managed to survive in disguise, through stories, legends, myths, folklore, both among common people and among the intellectual elite. The Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg (b. 1939) argues that medieval 'witchcraft' was nothing more than the persistence of a pre-Christian shamanic culture[84]. ale carnavalului A renowned specialist in mythology, Anne Lombard-Jourdan wrote about the pagan origins of the carnival[85]. Another French academic, Phillipe Walter, endeavoured to demonstrate that all medieval Christian mythology is nothing more than Christianized pagan mythology, which has been handed down as such to the present day[86]. Another example is Ramsay MacMullen's *Christianisme et paganisme IV-VII siècles* (Paris, Belles Lettres, 1998), which explores the interaction between paganism and Christianity, declaring that the Church's triumph was not due to the superiority of Christianity, but to the fact that Christianity forced its way through the assimilation of pagan culture[87].

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[83] On the persistence of "cultural paganism", Stephane Francois, *Le neo-paganisme.,* pp. 59-75.

[84] Carlo Ginzburg, *Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba*, Torinio, Einaudi, 1989 (Romanian translation, *Istorie nocturna. O interpretare a sabatului*, translated by Mihai Avădanei; postface by Valeriu Gherghel, Iași, Polirom, 1996). With a PhD awarded by the University of Pisa, Ginzburg taught at Universita di Bolognia and University of California, Los Angeles (1988–2006), and currently teaches at Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa.

[85] Anne Lombart-Jourdain, *Aux origines de carnaval. Un dieu gaulois ancêtre des rois de France,* Paris, Odile Jacob, 2005.

[86] Philippe Walter, *Mythologie chrétienne. Fêtes, rites et mythes du Moyen-âge,* Paris, Editions Entente, 1992, Romanian translation *Mitologie creştină. Sărbători, ritualuri şi mituri din Evul Mediu,* Artemis Publishing House, 2005, p. 199 states that Christianity undertook a deliberate transformation of the mythical figures of antiquity. Starting from ancient myths, it invented new myths. Christianity would have had no chance of establishing itself in the West if it had not been able to meet, in terms of dogma or ritual, the religious needs of the evangelised pagans. Philippe Walter, a specialist in the imaginary of the Middle Ages, is a professor of medieval literature at Université Grenoble III.

[87] Ramsay MacMullen was Professor Emeritus of History at Yale University, where he taught from 1967 to 1993. A similar idea is found with Ronald Hutton who states that pagan religions lost out to Christianity because they were not sufficiently equipped to resist the way in which the new faith was enforced, but left behind "an enormous and varied cultural legacy." (*The Pagan Religions of the British Isles. Their Nature and Legacy,* Blackwell, 1991, p. 388).

All these endeavours to emphasize the role of pre-Christian religions, downplaying or denying the role of Christianity, in fact resume the tenets of Margaret Alice Murray (1863-1963), a renowned Egyptologist of the interwar period. Margaret Murray theorized that paganism did not disappear in the Middle Ages, citing the witch-hunts as the clearest evidence for this. Her books, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and *The God of Witches* (1933), published by the prestigious Oxford University Press, were considered landmark studies for several decades[88]. It wasn't until the 1970s that Keith Thomas and Norman Cohn demonstrated the fragility of her arguments. They showed that the great witch-hunts of the Middle Ages had nothing to do with paganism, but were the result of fear of disease, natural disasters and witchcraft. The 40,000 estimated victims were seen, in one way or another, as enemies of society who had to be removed[89].

Neo-paganism, as an organized movement, emerged in the United States in the 1960s. In 1962, one of the most important neo-pagan communities was founded; *The Church of All Words* (CAW)[90], which is still active today, and the journal launched in the same year, *Green Egg*, became the most important communication channel of the neo-pagan movement. In 1998, CAW reported around 500 members, having branches in Switzerland and Australia. A few years later, federations were established with the aim of defending the religious rights of Pagans. One of the oldest is the already-mentioned *Pagan Federation International*, which serves as an international link between the *Pagan Federation*, founded in England in 1971, and similar groups around the world.

The establishment of neo-pagan communities and federations or alliances to represent and defend adherents' rights is one aspect of the process of institutionalisation that neo-paganism is currently undergoing[91]. This proved beneficial for their recognition in society, and with it for the recognition of neo-pagan chaplains in the army and prisons and then the recognition of marriages between pagans. The CAW was the first neo-pagan

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[88] On Margaret Murray and her influence on the academia, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, pp. 31-36 ("The Myth of Pagan Witchcraft").

[89] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic. Studies in Popular Belief in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England,* New York, 1971; Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons. The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom,* St. Albans, Paladin, 1976.

[90] On CAW, see the article published by James Lewis in *Encyclopedia of New Religions.* pp. 297-298.

[91] Barbara Jane Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies*, p. 4; Stephane François, *Le neo-paganisme*, pp. 87-90 („Vers une internationale païenne?")

group to succeed in obtaining federal tax exemption, in 1971. In Iceland, the Ásatrú Society has been recognized as an official religion since 1973.

Neo-paganism, with its various forms of manifestation, is very successful in Western societies. The number of people who declare themselves Pagans can be estimated from census returns, festival attendance, and the number of persons who subscribe to or buy Neo-Pagan publications. Surveys carried out by means of questionnaires distributed during the festivals have shown that neo-pagans are generally educated, middle class and mostly women[92]. In an interesting study on the growth pattern of the New Religious Movements, James Lewis shows that it is neither Scientology, which was the subject of his research, nor Mormonism, nor Jehovah's Witnesses that have the fastest growth, but Neo-Paganism[93]. Indeed, an analysis of censuses in the United States between 1990 and 2001 found that the number of people who declared themselves Pagans increased from 8,000 to 307,000. According to the 2001 census, 31,000 Pagans and 7,000 Wiccans were declared in England[94]. Paganism is also growing dramatically in Canada, Australia and New Zealand[95]. In 2000, the Ásatrú Society in Iceland had 500 members, or 0.2% of the total population.

The neo-paganism has found fertile ground in former communist states as well as in Greece. In Greece, there is the neo-pagan group Ύπατο Συμβούλιο των Ελλήνων Εθνικών (YSEE, Supreme Council of Ethnic Hellenes), founded in 1997, which is a founding member of WCER and a member of the European Union's action program against discrimination. There are also other pagan organizations such as Δωδεκάθεον which

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[92] Douglas Cowan, *Cyberhenge. Modern Pagans on the Internet,* Routledge, 2005; Helen Berger, Evan Leach, Leigh Shaffer, *Voices from the Pagan Census. A National Survey of Witches and Neo-pagans in the United States,* Columbia, 2003; Idem, *Contemporary paganism by the numbers,* în *Handbook of Contemporay Paganism,* edited by Murphy Pizza and James Lewis, Leiden, 2009, pp. 157-162.

[93] James Lewis, *The Growth of Scientology and the Stark Model of Religious "Success",* in *Scientology,* edited by James R. Lewis, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 117-140 (p. 124). The fact that neo-paganism is the fastest growing religion is asserted, in a triumphalist manner, by the movement's sympathisers. See Joyce and River Higginbolham, *An Introduction to Earth-Centered Religion*, p 14, stating that if one is a Pagan, then one belongs to the fastest growing group in the United States, many of whose adherents are educated, have important jobs, and contribute to the welfare system. Pagans have a right to be proud of who they are and to insist that the precious gift of freedom be applied to every religion in this country, large or small.

[94] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=954&Pos=&ColRank=2&Rank=224 (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[95] The 2001 census in New Zealand reported 5,862 Pagans (0.15% of the total population), in Canada 21,080 (0.07%), and in Australia 24,156 (0,13%). Cf. Barbara Jane Davy, *Introduction to pagan studies,* p. 3.

employs the term ἑλληνικὴ θρησκεία (Greek religion) to emphasize its opposition to Christianity. Followers of the group claim that the religion of the ancient Greeks has survived and been perpetuated from generation to generation.

Another author, Vlassis Rassias, has written about the persecution of Christians against the "Hellenes" and the Hellenic church. An estimated number of about 2,000 followers and 100,000 sympathisers of neo-paganism are in Greece today. In 2004, Athens hosted the 7th WCER World Congress and, in the same year, the theme of the Olympic Games' opening ceremonies in Athens focused on pagan rituals and the worship of the 12 deities of the Pantheon. In May 2006, the Athens Court of Appeal officially recognized the worship of the ancient Greek pantheon[96].

In Central and Eastern Europe, the best organised groups of this kind are those in the Baltic States, which has been interpreted as a consequence of the late Christianisation of these territories (in the 13th-14th centuries, through the missions and crusades organised by the Papacy). The initiator of modern paganist current in Lithuania, Wilhelm Starosta (1868-1953), known as Vydunas, put forth a synthesis of theosophy and Lithuanian pantheistic traditions. Marginalised under the Soviet occupation, Lithuanian neo-Paganism was revived by the creation of the *Romuva* Society (1968) with the aim of preserving indigenous culture. Since 1988, it has been operating under the name *Lithuanian Association for Ethnic Culture*. Today, an important role in the development of the Association is played by ethnologist Jonas Trinkunas (b. 1939), a leading academic figure and former director of the Department of National Culture in the Ministry of Culture[97]. After the demise of the Soviet Union, Vilnius became the centre of the Lithuanian neo-Pagan movement. Another important alliance of neo-pagan groups is based in this city: the *World Congress of Ethnic Religions*

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[96] See Drew Campbell, *Old Stones, New Temples. Ancient Greek Pagans Reborn,* Xlibris Corporation, 2000, as well as several articles published in prestigious foreign publications such as: Harry de Quetteville, *Modern Athenians fight for the right of worship the ancient Greek gods,* „The Telegraph" 8 May 2004; Hellena Smith, *Greek gods prepare for comeback*, „The Guardian" 5 May 2006;
(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/greece/1461311/Modern-Athenians-fight-for-the-right-to-worship-the-ancient-Greek-gods.html;
http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/may/05/greece, (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[97] Piotr Wiench, *Neo-paganism in Central European Countries* in Irena Borowik and Gregory Babibski (ed), *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe,* Krakow, 1997, pp. 283-293; *Romuva. Le renouveau païen en Lituanie*. "Religioscope" 4 May 2003, http://www.religioscope.info/article_147.shtml ; on Trikunas, see Michael York, *Pagan Theology,* pp. 273-274; website *Romuva*, (http://www.romuva.lt/new/).

(WCER)[98], which also organised there the first World Pagan Congress here (20-24 June 1998). Neo-Paganism is also present and active in the other Baltic states, as well as Ukraine and Russia[99].

Knowingly or unknowingly, all these groups act in favor of the "re-paganisation" of Europe, which seems to be facilitated, now more than ever, by the fact that the vast majority of Europeans are not churchgoers or practising Christians[100]. All the facts mentioned above justify the opinion that neo-Paganism, in its various manifestations, is a missionary concern and must be addressed thoroughly, all the more so as this issue has not received due attention in theological research after 1989[101].

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[98] WCER's aim is to support the creation of other such groups, to defend them legally, to represent them before international bodies, to organise colloquia, to edit publications. The WCER Constitution (http://www.wcer.org/explicitly states) that „ethnic religions" means ancient religions that have survived, such as Hinduism, animism or religions in the process of restoration such as Romuva in Lithuania, and emphasises that the rights of these ethnic and religious groups are human rights , (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[99] In Russia, neo-paganism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as Marxist ideology relented. The first Russian neo-paganists were dissident intellectuals, such as Anatoli Ivanov and Alexis Dobrovolkij, the latter known as Dobroslav. The Russian Neo-Pagans aimed to reconstruct the religion of the Slavic peoples. Today, Russian neo-Pagans are grouped into two main alliances: "Union of Slavic Native Belief Communities" and "Circle of Pagan Tradition". (See Nathalie Ouvaroff, *Russie. Les nouveaux courants du neo-pagansime,* "Religioscope", 9 aout 2007, http://religion.info/french/articles/article_332.shtml); Stella Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia."Double belief" and the making of an academic myth,* Routledge, 2009. In Latvia there is the "Dievturi"
movement, founded in 1920 by Ernest Brastins; in Belarus paganism is represented by the "Krywya Ethnocosmology Centre", named after a tribe that once inhabited this territory. In Ukraine there is a pagan group called Runvira (Native Ukrainian National Faith). Adrian Ivachiv, *The Revival of Ukrainian Native Faith,* in Michael Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures. Comparative Perspectives,* Santa Barbara, Calif. ; Oxford, England : ABC-CLIO 2005, pp. 209-239; Idem, *In Search of Deeper Identities. Paganism and Native Faith in Contemporary Ukraine* „Nova Religio", no. 8 (2005), pp. 7-38.

[100] See *Omul de cultură în faţa descreştinării.* Proceedings of the International Symposium *Omul de cultură în faţa descreştinării,* held at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, „1 Decembrie1918" University, Alba Iulia (13-15 May 2005), Reîntregirea Publishing House, Alba Iulia, 2005.

[101] Studies of which I am aware to date: Gavril Ioan Trifa, *Secularizare şi neo-păgânism*, in „Credinţa Străbună", no. 8, Alba-Iulia, 2004, p. 2; articles by Rev. Prof. Nicolae Achimescu, published in „Lumina de duminică": *Periplul celţilor de la druidism la creştinism*, no. 32 (96), 12 August 2007, p. 2; *Strategia misionară a Apostolilor în lumea păgână*, no. 46 (109), 18 November 2007, pp. 8-9; *Faţa neopăgână a Europei*, no. 45 (108), 11 November 2007, p. 2; *Creştinismul a triumfat. Păgânismul roman şi cultele orientale au pierit*, no. 3 (117), 20 January 2008, p. 2; Pr. Prof. Nicolae Achimescu, *Halloween, o reminiscenţă a revelionului celtic,* „Lumina", 08 January 2009; articles by Constantin Damian, published in the same newspaper: *Păgânismul în secolul al XXI-lea*,

2. Neopaganism in Romania.

Neopaganism reached Romania tentatively after 2000, via the Romanian version of the web site *Pagan International Federation* (PFI)[102]. This website aimed to support the emergence of a neopagan community in Romania, by promoting workshops and other events, by hosting the exchange of information and not least, by enabling the adherents of this movement to express their beliefs freely, to counter every criticism and to defend their rights in court[103]. With the contribution of the Romanian branch of *Pagan International Federation* the first courses of Wicca Witchcraft were held, under the supervision of Morgana (Morgana Sythove, coordinator of *Pagan Federation International*) and of Saddie (Tamas Nagy, co-founder of *Celtic-Wiccan Traditionalist Church in Hungary*)[104].

Around 2010, it was noted the on-line visibility of autochthonous pagan groups advocating the revival of the old beliefs of the Dacian tribes, inhabiting the Romanian territory during Antiquity[105]. The most notable among these groups was *Societatea Gebeleizis* (Gebeleizis Society), named after the god of lightning, thunder and rain worshiped by the Dacians. This organization identified as a cultural-religious association, whose main purpose was to establish and develop, on the territory of today's Romania, ethnic communities professing the religion and the culture of the Dacian ancestors. Although it claimed to be a local movement, its website promoted several deities belonging to the Scandinavian pantheon, despite the fact that the Dacian tribes possessed their own pantheon, headed by the god Zamolxis[106].

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no. 22 (46), 27 August 2006, pp. 8-9; *Harry Potter – un mediocru salvat de bagheta magică*, no. 11 (35), 11 June 2006, Iaşi, pp. 8-9.

[102] Radu Petre Mureșan, „Forme ale neopăgânismului în societatea contemporană/ Forms of Neopaganism in today's Society", *Anuarul Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă, „Justinian Patriarhul",* Universitatea din Bucureşti, nr. 9 (2009), pp. 685-709.

[103] https://ro.paganfederation.org/acasa/ (accessed on 25 May 2024)

[104]http://www.paean-network.org/morgana-sythove.html,(accessed on 25 May 2024) http://www.saddielamort.com/(accessed on 25 may 2024) https://m.facebook.com/thelemagick/photos/oa.509013759907395/2074428322865921/?_se_imp=2hVRExfObKrbmOU7g (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[105] The Dacian tribes, mentioned by Greek or Latin literary and historical writings, were the northern branch of the great Thracian family, populating the territories between the Aegean Sea and the Danube. The greatest flourishing of the Dacian civilisation spanned the period between the first century B.C and the first century A.D. when some of the Dacian tribes were united by Burebista (82-44 B. C) and then by Decebal (87-106 A.D). The Dacians were conquered in 106 A.D by the Roman Emperor Trajan (98-117 A.D).

[106] Radu Petre Mureșan, „Forme ale neopăgânismului în societatea contemporană", p. 688

More than a decade after the publication of this study, there are a number of elements of both continuity and discontinuity in the neo-pagan discourse in Romania. For instance, the website of *Pagan Federation International (PFI)* is still managed by persons who are not speakers of Romanian language. For this reason, certain parts are hardly comprehensible to the Romanian readership they actually target. The representatives of PFI Romania still cover their identity, by hiding behind pseudonyms (Ursus of Cluj-Napoca, who is also the website administrator and Sun Cat of Bucharest). The *Contact* section simply provides an email address, which can be accessed for any kind of information, clarifications, questions, while the section *Events* offers no information of public interest[107]. In my opinion, the website operates as a platform bringing into contact self-declared atheists or pagans, enabling them to get in touch with each other and possibly join a pagan community after they express their interest in doing so, by sending an email.

A novelty in the structure of the Romanian-language PFI website, compared to its former version, is that it borrows articles from the Romanian tabloids (yellow journalism), centered around certain media figures who have turned to witches and witchcraft. These posts covered only the period 2015-2016, although they are grouped under the heading „Recent posts"[108]. Another novelty: the website of *Pagan Federation International* indicates and provides links to other pagan groups organized on Romania's territory. In order, these are: „Romanian Coven", actually a Newsletter containing announcements only for the period 2006-2007 and providing a number of articles on neopaganism, whose authors use pseudonyms[109]; „Magyar Ásatrú Gyülekezési Pont" (headquartered in Hungary), with a Facebook page in Hungarian languange[110], „Societatea păgână din România" (The Pagan Society of Romania), headquartered in Brașov, having a Facebook page in Romanian language[111], „Societatea Gebeleizis" (Gebeleizis Society), a website currently inactive[112]; „Spiritualitate Daco-

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[107] https://forum.paganfederation.org/viewforum.php?f=38, (accessed 27 July 2023)

[108] „Doi fotbalisti din nationala (de fotbal a Romaniei) se trateaza la "vrajitoare"/ „Two football-players of Romania's national team turn to a healer" (https://ro.paganfederation.org/uncategorized/doi-fotbalisti-din-nationala-romaniei-se-trateaza-la-vrajitoare,(accessed on 25 may 2024)

[109] http://romaniancoven.blogspot.com/ (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[110] https://www.facebook.com/MagyarAsatru.GyP/ (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[111] https://www.facebook.com/SocietateaPagana/ (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[112] http://www.gebeleizis.org/ (accessed on 25 may 2024)

Românească" (Dacian-Romanian Spirituality), with a Romanian-language website[113] and „Zamolxiana" (inactive website).

As mentioned above, the web-site of Gebeleizis Society can not be accesed at present. It was still active in 2011, when researchers Rozália Klára Bakó and László Attila Hubbes of the Hungarian University of Transylvania conducted an empirical comparative study of two organisations they described as „ethno-pagan": *Gebeleizis* of Romania and și *Tengri* of Hungary, respectively. In their opinion, these two organizations had similar institutional mechanisms regulating the shaping of the community, the production of a set of values and the members being involved in the group's activities. According to these researchers, *Gebeleizis* stirred the interrest of Romanian mass-media, because of allegations concerning their contribution to promoting satanism and neo-nazism, while their members were investigated by the authorities and later were brought to court[114]. I could not find in the on-line realm any other Romanian web-site, blog or facebook page claiming to represent a group whose adherents identify as pagans and whorship the deities of the Dacian pantheon. Certainly, as the historian Cătălin Borangic stated, there are many web-sites reflecting the protochronist trend, most notably www.dacia.org and www.dacii.ro [115], but they are beyond the scope of the present study.

At the time I was collecting information for my previous study, I couldn't find any person identified publicly as pagan, just as I couldn't find any legally recognized pagan associations, similar to those operating in other Central and East European countries (Some articles in the written press stated that Gebeleizis Society operated as an NGO; however, I was unable to verify this piece of information). A few years later, though, a significant change occurred in the forms taken by the neo-pagan movement in Romania. I shall address briefly in the following pages.

After 2015, the virtual realm hosted several presentations and interviews given by a young lady from the Transylvanian city of Cluj-Napoca who was a self-professed pagan. A graduate from the Faculty of Fine Arts and Design of Cluj-Napoca, this young lady is a complex personality: she is a photographer and artist of photography; a crafts' person

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[113] https://spiritualitatedacoromaneasca.wordpress.com/ (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[114] Rozália Klára Bakó, László Attila Hubbes, „Religious Minorities' Web Rhetoric: Romanian and Hungarian Ethno-pagan Organizations" in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies,* vol. 10, issue 30 (winter 2011), pp. 127-158;

[115] Cătălin Borangic, „Fenomenul daco-roman: promotori și aderenți", *Buletinul Cercurilor Ştiinţifice Studeţeşti,* 14, 2008, p. 119-137 (p. 132). About the Romanian protochronism, see Alexandra Tomiță, O istorie „glorioasă": dosarul protocronismului românesc, Cartea Românească, 2007

who collects zoomorphic, anthropomorphic figurines, as well as ancient idols and toys; collaborator of a black metal band and a well-known actress of historical re-enactments.

To this young lady, paganism is a life-style, personal exploration and the freedom not to follow any model („*I am free to be as pagan as I want*"). With this pagan identity she professes, the young artist is very active in the social sphere, working to create a link between those members of her generation who have various artistic pursuits (music, acting, crafts, fine arts) and are open to the pagan ideas. This lady follow the *pagan path* openly: she actually posts her email address and phone number, she maintains conversations on her personal Facebook page and posts on Instagram photos showing herself in various pagan stances[116]. Moreover she writes almost exclusively in English and is known internationally as a „*wonderful transylvanian photography artist*"[117].

According to the sources available on-line, the young lady began her colaboration with the black metal band Ashena in 2016, when she is mentioned as *Morrigan* among the attendants of the pagan parties organized by this band[118]; from 2017 onwards she has been part, as member of the Association *Terra Dacica Aeterna* (a legally recognized NGO), in the National Festival of Ceramic Art, held by the Ethnographic Museum of Transylvania, where she has been running demonstrative and interactive workshops for children[119]; In 2017 she began to promote her bronze jewellery in ancient style, crafted according to her own vision and carrying strong symbolic connotations; finally, in 2018, she played the part of Dacian witch in the feature-length film *141 A.D Mission in Dacia,* produced by two associations of Sibiu, well-known for their historical re-enactments[120]. Since 2019, she has pursued almost exclusively, the sail of her pieces of jewellery,

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116 https://web.facebook.com/M%C3%B3r-r%C3%ADoghain-Laura-Petresc 461042164103713/?fref=ts&ref=br_tf; https://www.instagram.com/laurapetresc/, (accessed on 25 may 2024)

117 https://drunkinagraveyard.com/2016/01/08/dark-ladies-laura-petresc/ (accessed on 25 may 2024)

118 https://m.facebook.com/romanianrockradio/photos/a.144060358991100/982391605157967/?type=3&locale2=hi_IN , (accessed on 25 may 2024). *Ashena* band, set up in 2006, promotes a music style, they call „Pagan Introspective Black Metal", actually a pagan metal with influences from the Romanian tradition and folklore

119 https://actualdecluj.ro/incepe-festival-de-ceramica-la-cluj-vezi-programul/ , (accessed on 25 may 2024)

120 The film, which premiered at the Festival of Film and History of Râșnov (July, 2018) and then at Sibiu in October 2018, is available on-line with English subtitles on the Facebook page of the artistic production (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piJVBS_fdrE, (accessed on 25 may 2024)

via the platform Etsy, where she has opened an account by the name *Madonna Oriente*[121].

Around the same time, a high school student from the town of Bacău established the Association „The Neopagan Movement of Romania", later renamed „Ropaganism", aiming to protect and restore the pagan religion in Romanian society and to provide an institutional framework to the adherents of neopaganism in Romania. In 2018, the Association took the name *The New Pagan Dawn* (TNPD), and was legally recognized in 2020, operating as an NGO. The Association *The New Pagan Dawn* identifies as an „association with cultural-religious, philosophic and educational character" aiming to advocate social inclusion for minorities and vulnerable groups, improving the spiritual life of people by spreading information on the pagan and neo-pagan cults and esoteric sciences[122].

There are three major elements along the *pagan path* of the young founder of the *The New Pagan Dawn*. Firstly, he publicly identifies as a member of LGBTQ community. The official site includes and the founder's personal Facebook page present all the developments in this direction in Romania, including the recent debates on legalizing same-sex marrigies and the aknowledgement of the civil partnership between same-sex persons.

Secondly, we note the support offered to the satanist community of Romania. According the information posted on his own site and Facebook page, the young man originally founded the satanist coven „Dead Cross 666", as a subsidiary of the Association „The Joy of Satan". After this group dissolved in 2016 and after a time of „study and meditation", he declared himself to be a pagan[123]. Hower, he maintained tight links to satanism and currently one of the aims of the Association *The New Pagan Down* is to defend the interests of satanists in Romania, especially in their interaction with state authorities[124]. Even though satanism and the notion of Satan

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[121] https://www.etsy.com/shop/MadonnnaOriente?ref=mini_mfts_name&listing_id=729903449 (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[122] https://thenewpagandawn.eu/despre-mnr/ (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[123] https://cosminolteanu.eu/despre-mine/, (accessed on 25 may 2024) See the interview of Teodora Munteanu, published in the magazine *Vice Romania* on 25 January 2017, with an introduction reading: „In 2014, he caught the public attention following the scandal caused by Antena 1 TV and other TV channels of Romania which claimed that he had recruited young people in the pagan coven under the aegis of the Organisation Joy of Satan" https://www.vice.com/ro/article/mg9aeb/tanar-roman-din-cult-satanist, (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[124] „The New Pagan Dawn este o organizație culturală și religioasă de reprezentare a comunității păgâne din România, incluzând comunitatea demonolatră, cunoscută sub numele de satanistă"/„The New Pagan Dawn is a religious and cultural organization

received, in TNPD's discourse, different connotations than the usual ones, this connection between paganism and satanism is problematic to the researchers in the field of religious studies[125]. In general, when certain pagans declare themselves to be satanist, they claim they do not whorship Devil, but rather they regard the myth of Lucifer as a powerful symbol of the latent divine forces within the human being.

Finally, the young pagan seeks to defend the rights of the institutionalized children in orphanages and foster care, to make public physical and emotional abuse they are subject to, to fight for a change in the structure of Government institutions in charge with child protection, respectively to contribute to an improvement in quality of these children's life through charitable activities. Worth to mention that he is driven by a personal motivation, namely the fact that he himself used to be a institutionalized child.

His activism in the sphere of human rights and minority rights is associated to political pursuits: he has announced, in advance, his intention to run for deputy in the next Romania's parliamentary elections of 2024[126]. It should be added that all his postings are bilingual, in Romanian and English, and information is also available in other languages as well. Like the young lady of Cluj, this young man of Bacău makes public all his personal data as well as his contact data, and is active on social networks.

These are the major manifestations of neopaganism in Romania, as I was able to derive from the information posted on-line over the last ten years. In the following pages, I will address some of the methodological challenges entailed by such investigation and I will then dwell on the peculiarities of this phenomenon from the broader perspective of religious

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representing the pagan community in Romania, including the devil-worshipping community, known as satanist" (accessed on 25 may 2024).

[125] In this regard, Ronald Hutton stated: „I have have encountered anything remotely resembling Satanism in my entire experience of pagan witches" (*The Triumph of the Moon. A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft,* Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 407); Kathryn Roundtree declared that she had never met the devil or satanism during her anthropological research (Kathryn Roundtree, *Crafting Contemporary Pagan Identities in a Catholic Society*, Routledge, 2016, p. 8) Christopher Partridge in his turn stated that: „Paganism should not be understood as synonim for Satanism. For many pagans, such an association is offensive, being understood as one of the many ways Christians have historically sought to demonize indigenous, nature-venerating religions" (Christopher Partridge, „Indigenous and Pagan Traditions în Christopher Partridge", în Christopher Partridge and Gordon Melton (ed.), *Encyclopedia of New Religions. New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities,* Lion, 2004, p. 269)

[126] https://deputat.cosminolteanu.eu/ ,(accessed on 25 May 2024)

studies and in particular from the perspective of the missiological studies I am specialized in.

My information on the neopagan groups or persons who identify as pagan in Romania are almost exclusively gathered from electronic sources, that is: presentation websites, Facebook and Instagram pages, interviews posted in various on-line publications. Hence, a number of methodological challenges related, as Douglas Cowan pointed out, to the ephemeral and fluid nature of the information source; to the credibility of the information and the limited opportunities to verify whether the on-line community corresponds to an actual community in real life or at least to a community of the size declared on-line [127]. Thus, reasearchers into the neopagan phenomenon can find that certain information circulating virtually, which they use at a certain point in conducting a study, may be withdrawn after a while; that certains sites become inactive, as in the case of Gebeleizis Society mentioned above; or that other sites are „frozen" at some point as happened with the Romanian language section of Pagan Federation International website, whose last postings under the heading „Blog" date from 2016, and others under the heading „Forum" are as old as 2019.

The lack of statistical data prevents us from getting a clear picture of the neopagan presence in Romania. After 2000, three censuses were conducted in Romania in 2002, 2011, respectively in 2022[128]. According to the surveys whose results are available on the website of Romanian Institute for Statistics, the questions to be answered on religion concerned the churches and denominations officially recognized by the Romanian state, as well as sections headed „another religion", „no religion", „atheists", „not declared"[129].

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[127] Douglas Cowen, *Cyberhenge. Modern Pagans on the Internet,* Routledge, 2005, pp. 199-200

[128] For 2002 census: https://insse.ro/cms/files/rpl2002rezgen1/rg2002.htm , (accessed on 25 May 2024) https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-rpl-2021/rezultate-definitive-caracteristici-demografice/ (accessed 27 July 2023) ; for 2011 census, see the publication of the Institute for Statistics, *Ce ne spune recensământul din 2011 despre religie,* INS, 2013; For 2022 census, https://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Date-provizorii-RPL_cu-anexe_30122022.pdf (accessed on 25 May 2024)

[129] To be mentioned about the 2011 census: according to the European regulations, the citizens were allowed not to declare their religious affiliation. Also, the survey did not included as part of the stable population and consequently did not addressed the Romanian citizens with stable residence in Romania, but living abroad for more than 12 month for academic, work of business purposes. Thus, the religious affiliation of 1,259,739 citizens (6.26%) were categorized as information not available. To make things worst, the latest census of 2022, introduced the section „agnostics" and removed the section „not declared".

The adherents to neopaganism may fall into any of these cathegories or, on the contrary, they may indicate the religion or denomination in which they were born and possibly baptised. One may assume that under societal pressure, some persons declared they belonged to one denomination, while they actually were atheists or non religious (indifferent to religion). The reason may lie in their social conformism, understandable for persons born and raised in traditional families, who do not have the courage to aknowledge different identity all the more so in the case of a minority unpopular at present[130].

For this reason, as long as the surveys conducted in Romania do not include a section specially addressing paganism, the collected data are not very relevant for the present study. In order to estimate the proportion of the population who declare they are not affiliated to any of the traditional churches and denominations, and which might include the proponents of paganism, it should be noted that in 2011 none of the sections mentioned above exceeded 0.04% of the total population surveyed; and the partial results of 2022 census revealed that these section together amounted to 0.9% of the total population. These figures however must be taken with a grain of salt in order to avoid both downplaying the pagan presence in Romania and exagerating its importance, by assuming that all those who failed to declare their religious affiliation are pagans *in corpore*[131].

In addition to the scarce statistical data, there is a lack of sociological studies in Romania, based on social investigation or opinion surveys. Admittedly the Romanian experts in the sociology of religions are working on European projects addressing religiosity, religious affiliation

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130 Manuela Gheorghe, „Neafilierea religioasă în România după 1989. O abordare statistică", *Revista română de sociologie,* anul XXIX, nr. 3-4 (2018), p. 294; Francesco Molteni, „Religious Change among Cohorts in Eastern Europe: A Longitudinal Analysis of Religious Practice and Belief in Formerly Communist Countries", *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe,* vol. 10, nr. 1(2017), p. 35-53

131 TNPD claims that 14.7% of the Romanian population is pagan. In my opinion, his allegation is based on the false premise that all those who declared „another religion", „no-religion", „atheist", „not declared" are pagans and that only the lack of a section entitled as such prompted them to tick one of these options: „It should be noted that the percentage of pagans is obtained from combining the data of people who declared themselves agnostics, without religion or refused to declare religious affiliation due to the lack of options presented by pagan beliefs. According to DEX "pagan" is a person who is not Jewish, Muslim, atheist or Christian."
(https://www.bing.com/search?q=pagani+in+romania+recensamant&qs=HS&pq=pagani+in+romania&sc=8-17&cvid=806D84A32C0E4DD8BC6962F70846AEF9&FORM=QBRE&sp=1&lq=0, (accessed on 25 May 2024)

and secularisation as *European Value Study;* however their results are marginally relevant with regard to the situation of paganism in Romania. Thus, Bogdan Voicu and Mălina Voicu for exemple pointed out that in the case of Romania the demise of the USSR did not impact the religious life in a significat way, so that between 1990-2000 Romania counted among the most traditional and religious countries of Europe. Only after the accession to the European Union in 2007, which entailed the migration of the labour force, academic mobility and greater openness to European values, some changes occurred, allowing new religious trends and alternatives to reach Romania[132].

In the field of religious studies were published a number of valuable works analysing the pagan phenomenon in the Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) often by comparison to the similar phenomenon in Western Europe and USA[133]. The neopagan movement in Romania did not catch the interest of foreign researchers, who only drew a parallel to the neopagan developments in Hungary or placed it in the broader context of the CEE religious landscape after the fall of communism[134]. The findings of these researchers however are not always applicable to the Romanian case.

In the introduction to the volume *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movement in Central and Eastern Europe*, editors Katarina Atamurto and Scott Smith noted that although the CEE countries share the traumatic experience of communist regimes and the emergence of the neopaganism was inevitably linked to demise of these regimes, the concrete manifestations of the neopagan phenomenon differ from one country to the next, and the comparative study is hindered by the linguistic barriera between them[135]. This opinion was shared by Kathryn Rountree who pointed out that it is important to investigate neopaganism in cultural context and that a „creative adjustement" occurs when neopaganism is inoculated into a local tradition. Although the neopaganism is „a global new

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[132] Bogdan Voicu, Malina Voicu, „Continuities and Discontinuities in Social Values in Postcommunist Romania", *Studia Universitas Babeș-Bolyai. Sociologia,* no. 1, (June), 2009, p. 170, 174.

[133] Michael Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures,* ABC Clio Inc, 2005; Piotr Wiench, „A Postcolonial Key to understanding Central and Eastern European Neopaganism" in Karina Aitamurto and Scott Simpson (ed.), *Modern Pagan and Naive Faith Movement in Central and Eastern Europe,* Routledge, 2014 ; Kathryn Rountree, *Contemporary pagan and Native faith Movement in Europe: Colonialist and Nationalist Impulses,* New York, 2015;

[134] Laszlo-Attila Hubbes, Rozalia Klara Bako, „Religious Minorities Web Rhetoric: Romanian and Hungarian Ethno-Pagan Organizations", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol 10, issue 30 (2011), p. 127-158

[135] Karina Aitamurto and Scott Simpson, *Modern Pagan and Naive Faith Movement,* p. 4

religious phenomenon", its local expressions are diverse, even within the same country with regard to the religious or moral belief, practices and values[136]. In his turn, Piotr Wiench argued that the neopagan groups in CEE do not fall into the category of New Religious Movements, but rather are expressions of the cultural resistance to modernity, in conjunction with the construction of an alternative identity. From this standpoint, their characteristic features are: polytheism, absence of proselytism, discourses centred around identity and the artistic exploration of faith[137].

The pagan path of the young Transylvanian artist, as indicate her interviews available on-line, has three major components: 1) feminist and wicca discourse: identfying with the Goddess, perceived in a plurality of historical and cultural forms: „I am Andraste, Bendis, sometimes Potnia Thernon, maybe a witch, maybe a fairy, I am who I want to be in my creations"[138], 2) ecofeminism expressed in reverence for nature and belief in the sacredness of the earth: happiness is „to see my wood house finishing, near the forest, to have there a horse, a goat, a raven, a wolf-dog and two cats (maybe a man)" and her greatest fear is losing connection with nature and primordial roots of humans"[139] și 3) dwelling on pre-Christian elements in Romanian folklore.

Her pagan stance is eclectic, as described by Strmiska: she selects at will religious ideas, practices and deities in the pagan past of Europe, and combines what she seems to be similar or complementary or whats she feels is fit for her pagan spiritual path[140]. In doing so, the young pagan takes on pseudonyms- a common practice in paganism, shared by many other traditions when a person undertakes a religious commitment[141]. In her case, the most frequent alias is *Morrigan*, the feared godess of war and death in Irish mythology, whom she emulates in many of her pagan personas. She also often associates with Madonna Oriente, a godess name found in the medieval Italian imagery and thought to personify the *Moon*.

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[136] Kathryn Rountree, *Contemporary pagan and Native faith Movement in Europe: Colonialist and Nationalist Impulses,* New York, 2015, p. 1

[137] Piotr Wiench, „A Postcolonial Key to understanding Central and Eastern European Neopaganism", p. 4

[138] https://www.facebook.com/paganportraits/, (accessed on 25 may 2024); Barbara Davy, *Paganism. Critical Conceps in Religious Studies,* Routledge, 2019, p. 219

[139] Usula King, „Feminist and Eco-feminist spirituality" în Christopher Partridge and Gordon Melton (ed.), *Encyclopedia of New Religions. New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities,* p. 379-384:

[140] Michael Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures,* ABC Clio Inc, 2005, p. 18

[141] Douglas Cowan, *Cyberhenge. Modern Pagans on the Internet,* Routledge, 2005, p. 25

Further research should take a multidisciplinary approach, necessary to investigate the artistic production of this pagan young lady, its iconography and symbolism, and possibly to compare it with the artistic output of other young people in Romania or abroad. This is all the more necessary as lately, she has made herself known in the public sphere almost exclusively, through her jewellery in ancient style, „Jewellery for Goddesses", which she claims to reflect her inner world[142]. Morever, as Adam Anczyk and Joanna Malita-Krol argued, it may also be an inquiry about the boundaries of the term "ritual". Performing music, reading poetry, dancing and other artistic activities should be taken into consideration, as forms of ritualization, even if some of these practices are not concentrated on worship[143].

To define the pagan voice of the young lady of Cluj, who describes herself as a „solitary soul"[144], one may say that she expresses what Angela Coco termed „networked individualism" or, in the words of Kathryn Rountree, participation in the „global cultural flow of ideas"[145]. However, due to her interest in every art form that recreates the ancient world (photography, music, acting, ancient artefacts), she is part of a network of persons with similar concerns; we can not know how extended or limited this network is and also whether the people belonging to it are pagan or mere admirers of Antiquity. Clearly, in following this pagan path she is highly creative and the mainstream religion, Orthodox Christian, is actually ignored.

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142 „I create pieces which translate my own world. As in ancient times, my creations focus on the depiction of jewelry with heightened symbolic meaning. Not as simply adornment, but as symbols, amulets, and rituals, continuing to show to the people the beauty of ancient art, inspiring myself from it, from nature, stories, magic, animals, gods. Jewelry that have power. Creating jewelry with a historical relevance, I use and I'm still learning the historical techniques of lost wax casting, hand forging, repoussé and chasing. All pieces are designed and produced locally in my grandfather's studio, in a village in Transylvania. Concept, accessories, outfits, make-up, photos, edits, are done by myself. I am also the model" (https://www.etsy.com/shop/MadonnnaOriente?ref=l2-about-shopname , (accessed on 25 may 2024)

143 Adam Anczyk and Joanna Malita-Krol, „Between "theological correctness" and everyday life: contemporary Paganism as lived religion" in Adam Anczyk and Ioanna Malita-Krol (ed.), *Old Ways in a Modern World. Contemporary Paganism as Lived Religion,* Sacrum Publishing, 2017, p. 17

144 https://drunkinagraveyard.com/2016/01/08/dark-ladies-laura-petresc/ (accessed on 25 may 2024)

145 Angela Coco, „Pagan Religiousness as „network individualism" in Martin Fowler, John D. III Martinm and John L. Hochheimer (ed.), *Spirituality: Theory, Praxis and Pedagogy,* Brill, 2012, p. 125-138; Kathryn Rountree, *Cosmopolitanism, nationalism and modern paganism,* Palgrave Studies, 2017, p. 6

As president of TNPD, the pagan young man stands out through sustained internal organisational actions (establishing branches in the great cities of Romania and even the smaller towns; regular convening of the Board of Administrators, publishing its decisions in a Gazette of the Association available on line) and efforts to join European or world pagan federations: Pagan Awareness Network (PAN), Pagan Federation International (PFI), European Congress of Ethnic Religions (ECER).

These efforts are not without challenges to his authority, legitimacy and credibility as leader of the Association: in 2018, one of his close collaborators, having been excluded from the Association established his own pagan Association by the name Societatea Păgână (The Pagan Society) headquartered in Brașov[146]; in the same year, the young founder of TNPD attended the discussion forum on the Romanian language section of PFI, but its administrator rejected his claim to speak on behalf of the pagan community in Romania[147]; finally, although he frequently mentions his affiliation to EHRC, I could not find the name of TNPD among the signatories of the 2023 Declaration of Riga issued by EHRC[148].

However, the young pagan and the Association he heads are among the signatories of Xenia Declaration - signed by ten other neopagan groups operating in din Romania[149]. seeking details on them, I was surprised to find that one is an independent organization, namely Societatea Păgână (The Pagan Society) of Brașov already mentioned, while the other nine are satellites of the same TNPD[150].

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[146] The Facebook postings of the Pagan Society of Brașov are constant between August 2018 and September 2020 and fall into four broad categories: information articles on the old religions and mythologies, news about the activity of the neopagans in Europe (temple openings, pagan festivals), supporting the LGBTQ community, polemic with TNDP and its founder. These postings were suddenly discountinued when TNDP sued the leader of the Pagan Society (https://www.facebook.com/SocietateaPagana/,(accessed on 25 may 2024)

[147] https://forum.paganfederation.org/viewtopic.php?t=6557, (accessed 27 July 2023).

[148] See https://thenewpagandawn.eu/2023/07/02/participarea-tnpd-la-ecer2023-si-declaratia-ecer-de-la-riga/ (accessed 27 July 2023) compared with the EHCR official site https://sites.google.com/view/ecer2023/declaration?fbclid=IwAR08AGSNO3J60YDXy49u-5Nq0M36_Ptg6lqNTHiShqA0KUwxbeT5jn2bqCs, (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[149] https://www.xeniadeclaration.com/ , (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[150] 1) *Asociația ucenicii întunericului/ The Association Disciples of the Darkness of Sibiu* introduces itself on Facebook page as thematic group of TNPD which aims to to represent the pagans-satanist cult in Romania; 2) *Comunitatea elevilor politeiști/ Community of Polytheist High School Students* „is a body of The New Pagan Dawn” (posting of 20 April 2023): 3) *Institutul național de cercetare și studii religioase Harapollo/ The National Institute for Religious Research and Studies*, https://thenewpagandawn.eu/seminarii-pagane/ trains future priets and theologians of The New Pagan Dawn; 4) *Paganism, esoterism and the Occult*- private group; 5) The Platform *Pagan Acceptance*- postings only

As a result of all the developments briefly described above, the official website of PFI Romania does not mention TNPD among the pagan groups in Romania, which means it either does not acknowledge it as pagan, or it disagrees with its creeds or its founder's actions. The above mentioned PFI website does mention however the Pagan Society of Brașov which is the schismatic group breaking away from TNPD. We can regard this as an instance of Pandora's box, in the words of Douglas Cowan, who argued that in paganism, where the personal subjective experince has been given the value of personal ontology, often emerge tension between whishes, dreams and pagan aspirations[151].

Unlike the young woman of Cluj who travels her pagan path under pseudonyms, the young pagan man keeps his actual name. The neopagan themes are numerous on the websites he administrates: the wheel of the year, the religious and liturgical calendar for the current year, the Moon phases, but equally visible are New Age themes such as chakras opening whose mechanism he tries to explain by invoking the Avatar cartoons[152].

The relation between TNPD and Christianity is a problematic one. Among the texts posted by this pagan young man, there is polemic with the Christian Church throughout history: its fight against ancient paganism, the medieval witch hunt, the excesses of Christian missionaries against indigenous population during the modern period. However, this polemic, which is common and natural to pagan discourse[153], is inconsistent in the case of TNPD since today's Roman-Catholicism seems to be a model for the young pagan: the Association he heads imitates the Roman-Catholic Church being organized into parishes, dioceses and archdioceses. Moreover, as this year (2023), the young man graduated from the Faculty of Roman-Catholic Theology of the University of Bucharest, he introduces himself as a Roman-Catholic priest, although it is not known whether he has been ordained in the meanwhile. Consequently, in seeking models, the young man looks not so much at the past, as the present and the role-model of Christian priest seems to be powerful enough to be followed.

On the contrary, the criticism against the Orthodox Church of Romania, the majority Church, against its actions and hierarchs is frequent.

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in 2015; 6) *Sclipiri de magie/Magic Twinkle* -Târgu Mureș, private group associated to TNPD; 7) *Societatea păgână kemetică/ Kemmetic Pagan Society*- Bacău, „thematic group of TNPD", having the same founders as TNPD; 8) *Societatea wiccana/ Wiccan Society*- Botoșani, having the same email address and site asTNPD; 9) *Templul din Cumidava/ The Temple of Cumidava* - Brașov- inactive website

[151] Douglas Cowan, *Cyberhenge,* p. 49

[152] https://thenewpagandawn.eu/deschiderea-chackrelor/ ,(accessed on 25 may 2024)

[153] Michael Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures,* ABC Clio Inc, 2005, p. 29

In this light, in my opinion, chosing 30 November as the *Day of the Pagan Holocaust in Romania* is not coincidental[154]. According to the tradition of the Romanian Orthodox Church, November 30 is dedicated to the Holy Apostle Andrew; Orthodox Church historians have proved that he preached in Scythia Minor (today's Dobrogea) and christianized Romania. Consequently, this day is both a religious feast and a national holiday in Romania.

In my opinion, the young founder of The New Pagan Dawn confirms the view of Mika Lassader according to whom individual values inform the various religious and secular standpoints[155]. Although is the self-proclaimed continuator of an ancient tradition and the subtitle of his Association is „Tradition and continuity in the work of gods in Romania", he does not focus on the reconstruction or revival of pre-christian religions on the territory of today's Romania, but instead he promotes theoretically, an eclectic paganism, while he is deeply anchored in the social-political and religious realities of Romania.

In Romania, neopaganism is being organized and constructing its identity while neopagan voices are increasingly heard in the public sphere. Developments are spectacular even from one year to the next, while the investigation of this phenomenon from an interdisciplinary perspective is quasi-inexistent. By putting together the information provided by official websites and social networks, we face a puzzle difficult to solve. However, we shall put forth a few general remarks which also might provide the conclusion of the present study. The first remark is that ten years ago, world paganism was attempting to conquer Romania. Even the so-called autochthonous Gebeleizis Society was headquartered in Florida, USA. On the contrary, today, we witness the reverse trend: promoting abroad the pagan paths "made in Romania". Both the young artist of Cluj and the young founder of TNDP have many posts in English, which, in our opinion, indicates they are seeking international visibility and intend to join global pagan networks. Interestingly, when these pagan voices resounded in the Romanian public arena, the activity of the Romanianlanguage PFI website was discontinued for unknown reasons.

A second remark: Neopaganism in Romania, as known before, was secretive about the real names of the coordinators, their contact data, and the events underway; all these were known only to those about to become members. Today, the self-declared pagans make public their biographical

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[154] https://thenewpagandawn.eu/holocaustul-pagan/, (accessed on 25 may 2024)

[155] Mika Lassander, *Post-Materialist Religion. Pagan Indentities and Value Change în Modern Europe,* Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, p. XX (*Preface*)

data or personal contact information (phone, mobile, email, Facebook, and other social networks). However, this transparency does not lead to a better understanding of the belief system they profess or a better knowledge of the communities they founded or belong to (if any). Generally speaking, we do not have any information about the followers' profile, their age or gender, the tradition they were born into, or the reasons for rejecting their previous religious affiliation. A third remark: In the context of the debate around reconstructionism and eclecticism within contemporary paganism in the CEE countries, Michael Strmiska pointed out that reconstructionists "regard older traditions as better established, more authoritative, and more authentic than those that are newly created or vaguely imagined" and that "the Reconstructionist form is therefore most strongly attested in Eastern Europe, where ethnic culture and identity remain important organizing principles of social life and cultural activities". However, the binomial reconstructionism–eclecticism, so important for the former communist countries, as Strmiska pointed out, is less relevant in Romania's case. Very little is known about the gods worshipped by the Dacians and about their religious practices, while protochronism, manifested as thracomania and dacomania, has been instrumentalized ideologically and politically over the last two centuries. Romanian communist authorities tolerated protochronism and enforced it as an official historical narrative to such an extent that it later caused an opposing phenomenon of rejection and even debunked the myth of the glorious past of the Romanian people. Certainly, as the historian Catalin Borangic stated, there are many websites reflecting the protochronist trend in Romanian society, most notably www.dacia.org (accessed on 24 May 2024) and www.dacii.ro (accessed on 24 May 2024), but they are beyond the scope of the present study. The neopagan presence in Romania reflects an interesting relationship between neopaganism as a "global religion" and the local context. Therefore, its investigation from various angles should deserve an in-depth study. However, a question arises, as Bakó and Hubbes put it: why would researchers be interested in studying a marginal phenomenon and the fluid community around it, which hardly succeed in defining itself at the intersection between online and offline? The answer to this question is different and depends on the researcher's background. For mission studies or for missiology as a theological discipline, outlining the status quo of neopaganism in the Romanian context could be an indispensable tool for further research to take into consideration certain intriguing aspects, such as whether and how pagans interact with the Christian Orthodox majority or their attitude towards various issues and problems of today's Romanian society. It could further investigate to what extent neopaganism, as manifested in the Romanian context, is one of the

many facets of postmodernism and what could be the most appropriate methodological tools to deal with it.

A general remark is that 10 years ago, world paganism was attempting to conquer Romania. Even the so-called autochthonous Gebeleizis Society was headquartered in Florida, USA. On the contrary, today we witness the reverse trend: promoting abroad the paganism „made in Romania". Both the young artist of Cluj and the young founder of TNDP have many postings in English, in my opinion seeking international visibility and intending to join to global pagan networks. When these pagan voices resoundes in the Romanian public arena, we noted that the activity of Romanian language PFI website is discontinued, without knowing the reasons.

A second remark: neopaganism, as it was before, was secretive about the actual names of the coordinators, their contact data, the events underway, which were known only to those about to become members. Today, the self-declared pagans make public their biographical data or personal contact (phone, mobile, email, Facebook, other social networks). However, this does not lead to better knowledge of the impact and specific character of the neopaganism in Romania, especially with regard to the number of adherents, their age or gender, the tradition they were born into and the reasons for rejecting their previous religious affiliation[156]. A third remark: the religious studies mentioned above indicate that the binomial reconstructionism-eclecticism is important for CEE countries, but less relevant in Romania's case. The communist regime exacerbated protochronism to such an extent that it caused an opposing phenomenon of rejection and even debunking the myth of the glorious past of the Romanian people. This is why, I did not discussed those groups which identify as ethno-centric but whose members do not profess polytheism and do not practice pagan rituals, but confine themselves to protochronism namely to extolling the glorious past of pre-Roman Dacia.

Finally, we can not fully agree with the opinion that taking on a pagan identity must be understood as a gesture of defying the models of religious authority and that many embrace paganism out of their desire to mark their definitive break from Christianity, its values and morals[157]. Rather, neopaganism is only one of the many facets of postmodernism, and as such it is difficult to assess from the perspective of Christian mission.

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[156] Adam Anczyk and Joanna Malita-Krol, „Between "theological correctness" and everyday life: contemporary Paganism as lived religion" în Adam Anczyk and Ioanna Malita-Krol (ed.), *Old Ways in a Modern World. Contemporary Paganism as Lived Religion,* Sacrum Publishing, 2017, p. 17

[157] Michael Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures,* p. 7

The neo-pagan presence in Romania reflects an interesting relationship between the neopaganism as „global religion” and the local context. Because the evolution of this movement is continuously evolving, a great amount of studies from various directions and perspectives are necessary in order to understand the complexity of this phenomenon.

3. Neopaganism and occultism as sub-culture of the youth.

The contact with neo-paganism occurs as early as childhood. Cartoons based on medieval stories or adapted legends are an important factor in the unconscious promotion of paganism from an early age[158]. Certain films with a pagan plot can also be mentioned[159]. The American series *Charmed*, also broadcast on Romanian television, is inspired by the Book of Shadows, which is a compendium of magical and religious texts of the Wiccan tradition[160]. The film *The Craft* (1996) was so popular that having watched it, many young people joined Wicca covens. Also, the book authored by Silver Ravenwolf, a Wicca priestess and director of International Wiccan/Pagan Press Alliance, *Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation,* became a best-seller in the United States in 1998. Silver Ravenwolf insists that a true wiccan is not one who dresses in witch's attire, but one who respects nature and the cosmos, respects those around, and never does any harm.

Last but not least, the success of the literary genre known as *heroic fantasy* is a genuine socio-cultural phenomenon. J.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* has been read by millions of people worldwide. Built around the idea of initiatic quest, the book is a synthesis of Celtic and Scandinavian paganism. The worldwide success of the film version of *Lord of the Rings*, confirmed that the ideas promoted in the book resonated with our contemporaries[161]. The case of J.K. Rowling's character Harry Potter is similar. The seven volumes are an unrivalled literary success: 400 million copies translated into over 63 languages worldwide. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a magical world where all the elements of the genre known as *heroic fantasy* can be found: magic, enchanted forests, dwarves and giants, dragons, characters who embody evil.

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158 Jean Bruno-Ranard, *Bandes dessinées et croyances du siècle,* Paris, PUF, 1986; Stephanie Francois, *Le paganisme dans la bande dessinée,* ”Etudes et analyses” no. 11, janvier 2007.

159 John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981), Jacques Tourneur's *The Cat People* (1982), Robert Hard's *The Wicker Man* (1973), Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995) etc.

160 ”Book of Shadows” in James Lewis, *Witchcraft Today. An Encyclopedia of Wiccan and Neopagan Traditions*, California, 1999, p. 35 .

161 *Du „Seigneur des anneaux” à Harry Potter* in Fréderic Lenoir, *Les métamorphoses de Dieu. La nouvelle spiritualité occidentale,* Plon, 2003, pp. 346-348.

Many parents certainly think that reading the Harry Potter books is benign entertainment, which should not be a cause for concern. In reality, reading such books fuels young people's interest in magic and their curiosity to experience real wizardry. They are a far cry from children's stories of good fairies and evil witches, where good always prevails.

On the other hand, it is generally known that in recent years the Disney studios have released a series of artistic films that rewrite, from various perspectives, the well-known fairy tales of childhood.[162]. Rewriting fairy tales is not a new phenomenon. Interdisciplinary studies in the field of folklore, mythology, and comparative literature have highlighted the fact that between the 17th and 19th centuries, Basile Giambattista in Italy, Charles Perrault in France, and the Grimm brothers in Germany, as well as other authors, collected and revised the fairy tales that were circulating orally, giving them a literary form through which they expressed their own aesthetic or ideological positions.[163].Thus, the collections of fairy tales that appeared in Europe at that time presented an amazing diversity; one and the same fairy tale could have several versions depending on the geographical and socio-economic context in which it was rewritten[164]. In his brilliant essay Breaking the Disney Spell, Jack Zipes captures this moment well when he says that "it was not once upon a time, but at a particular moment in history that Disney cast a curse, a spell on the fairy tale, and since then the fairy tale has remained captive." And for this, the American professor continues, Disney did not use magic or demonic powers but called upon the most modern technological means and media of the time with the aim of misappropriating his European fairy tales and turning them into typical American stories[165].

[162] Dintre acestea, amintim: *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), *Enchanted* (2007), *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), *Tangled* (2010), *Red Riding Hood* (2011), *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), *Hansel and Gretel. Witch Hunters* (2013), *Frozen* (2013), *Hansel and Gretel* (2013), *Maleficent* (2014), *Cindarella* (2015), *Beauty and the Beast* (2017).

[163] Jack Zipes, *Hapilly Ever After. Fairy Tales, Children and the Culture Industry,* Routledge, 1997, p. 3. Professor Jack Zipes, who taught German Literature, Comparative Folklore, and Literary Theory at the Universities of Munich, New York, and Minnesota, is recognized as one of the world's foremost experts on fairy tales, specializing in their evolution as a literary genre, their role, and their societal impact.

[164] Maria Tatar highlighted seven literary versions of Cinderella, including those of Charles Perrault and the Grimm brothers, while Snow White has four versions (The Classic Fairy Tales). The Norton Critical Edition, 1999, covers pages 74–100 and 101–137, respectively. Maria Tatar is a professor at Harvard University, teaching folklore, mythology, and German literature.

[165] Jack Zipes, „Breaking the Disney Spell", în Maria Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales. A Norton Critical Edition*, 1999, 332-352 (p. 332).

In recent years, and especially after the year 2000, the same Disney studios have led a formidable reverse process of de-standardizing fairy tales, launching a series of artistic productions that are innovative and spectacular adaptations of classic fairy tales. In this revolutionary Disney vs. Disney, Disney has released more than 100 film productions that rewrite the well-known fairy tales of childhood in a postmodern key[166]. The animated productions Snow White and the Seven Darws (1937), Cinderella (1950), and Sleeping Beauty (1959), which brought joy to the childhood of today's parents and grandparents, drew inspiration from literary versions. These versions shared a similar plot: a simple girl or princess experiences a trauma; the young woman faces persecution or even death; she receives assistance from fairies, princes, or animated objects; the ending is happy through marriage; and the prevailing message was that kindness, innocence, and patience will ultimately reap rewards.

The recent adaptations of the three fairy tales, Snow White and the Hunting Man (2012), Maleficent (2014), Cinderella (2015) present us with a great challenge, finding ourselves unable to find a common denominator in terms of genre of the film, the plot and the themes addressed. If the story of Cinderella is the only production that preserves the romance of the classic fairy tale, as well as the original narrative, although sprinkled with many feminist accents, the film about Snow White presents many changes in the narrative discourse (the king is killed by his new wife, Ravenna, while White like Snow lives as a prisoner in a tower, the kiss is given by the huntsman, not the prince, and in the end Snow White takes her revenge by killing the queen), to which are added ingredients à la américaine (gratuitous violence, scenes with connotations sexual, Hollywood-style chases through swamps and dark forests), while Maleficent is a production that completely betrays not only the classic story Sleeping Beauty, but also the cartoon produced by the same Disney studios in the year 1959. That is why the specialists in the evolution of the fairy tale and also film critics believe that in this case we cannot speak of a new version ("new version"), but rather of a subversion ("subversion") of the well-known story[167].

As concerns animated series, I will try to identify the main themes and tenets put forth by some popular cartoons and formulate some

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[166] Scholars have discussed the "torrent" of Hollywood adaptations of fairy tales (Christina Bachillega, Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder, Wayne State University, 2013, p. 76) or the "cultural tsunami" resulting from this phenomenon (Jack Zipes, The Great Cultural Tsunami of the Fairy Tales Films, in the preface of his book Films Beyond Disney, International Perspectives, 2015, pp. 1-11).

[167] Sue Short, *Fairy Tales and Film. Old Tales with a new Spin,* Palgrave MacMillian, 2015, p. 140.

conclusions from a missionary perspective. I shall endeavor to strike a balance between two extreme attitudes I met while collecting data for this study. On the one hand, there is the tendency to malign all animated TV series and see them as propagating occult or satanic symbolism, which is perceived at every turn, pervading everything. On the other hand, there is a tendency to credit cartoons with educational qualities, asserting they are all edifying and have only good things to teach our children. I'll point out some strange aspects and particular clichés that form a common denominator of recent cartoons.

We start with *Sofia the First,* a 2012 Walt Disney production, broadcast by Disney Junior channel. Sofia is a nice little commoner girl, who suddenly becomes a princess and shares a number of adventures with her step-siblings, Amber and James, in a magical realm named Enchancia. The cartoon is intended for preschoolers and schoolchildren and, at first sight, seems to convey the notions of honesty, goodness, frienship, loyalty. However, as I watched a few episodes, I found that the message conveyed by this animated series is rather confusing. The episode entitled *The Good Little Witch*, translated into Romanian as *Micuța vrăjitoare [The Little Witch]*, is a case in point[168]. The cartoon introduces Lucinda, a little girl Sofia's age, who is feared by all the citizens of Enchancia, because of her hexes. Lucinda has no friends, since all the children her age avoid her, but she takes her revenge by hexing anyone who comes her way.

Sofia, however, approaches her and teels her that "everyone needs friends, even witches" (min 05.01) convincing her to apologize to all she had upset. As she is not taken seriously, Lucinda becomes mean again: "I'll go back to being mean. Hexing is so much easier!" (min 8.48). Ultimately, Lucinda turns from a bad witch into a good witch, compensating for the evil she had done, making up for her mistakes to the satisfaction of those around her. The episode concludes with Lucinda's remark: "I knew I could be a good witch" (min. 19.58), confirmed by Sofia: "You're the best witch" (min 20.38).

The cartoon conveys two major messages. First, it abolishes the divide between good and evil. The bad witch has a very human side to her, which she only needs to discover. When Sofia attempts to reason with her, Lucinda opens up and explains that she comes from a family of witches – her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, so she knows no better than hexing. In other words, the witch is not truly evil, but simply misunderstood – hence her meanness. Actually, those around her are to

[168] Sofia the First, season 1, episode 11: *Micuța vrăjitoare* (https://ok.ru/video/29809183377, (accessed on 25 May 2024)

blame for this because they never give her any credit, as the lyrics point out in Lucinda's song: "*'Cause I want to be a good little witch/ Just give me a chance and I'll make a switch*".

Secondly, the cartoon introduces to children the notion that a person can have magical powers, which is not evil in itself. I find it the very important to mention the closing scene, which lasts very long (around 40 seconds, between min. 19.58-20.38), where the children form the magic circle, holding hands and having the "little witch" in the middle. As show the studies or websites promoting occult practices, any act of magic or ritual is performed inside the magic circle. Once drawn, the magic circle becomes a "sacred space", whose main function is to protect the person within, and also to indicate the equal status of the persons attending the magic ritual.

Occult elements, introduced in a humorous key and in a very attractive manner, are ubiquitous in this cartoon: Sofia has a magic amulet that enables her to talk to animals or summon other Disney princesses when she needs them; the Palace has an official wizard, named Cedric, who amuses children with party magic and who provides advice whenever a difficult situation occurs. In his turn, Cedric refers to *The Magic Book* every time.

The Magic Book plays an important role in another cartoon which children enjoys watching: *Robin Hood. Mischief in Sherwood*[169]. From the well-known story of the British popular hero, all that has been retained is the figure of the young archer. For the rest, the cartoon is populated with fire-spitting dragons, witches, and of course presents the adventures centered on *The Magic Book*. As in the case of Sofia the First, the message conveyed is ambiguous. The little girl opening The Magic Book, received from the dragon, is surprised to find that any incantation she utters is turned into a spell: "*I am a witch,* she cries in despondency, *I'll spend the rest of my days in prison! No, you're not a witch*, the others encourage her, *you are a magician. Just think – there is so much good you could do with your new powers!"* (min. 07.53).

The notion that magic is a good force, which can be used for the benefit of people, also appears in the animated series *Dora's Enchanted Forest Adventures.* One of the episodes is translated into Romanian language, with the title *Aventura lui Dora (sic) în pădurea fermecată. Povestea regelui unicorn*[170] *(Dora's Adventure in the Enchanted Forest.*

[169] *Robin Hood. Nazbâtii în Sherwood* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXFSOUwbido, (accessed on 25 May 2024)

[170] *Aventura lui Dora în pădurea fermecată. Povestea regelui unicorn* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpNZiGzdZyc, (accessed on 25 May 2024)

Tale of the Unicorn King). The unicorn – an animal with a horn projecting from its forehead – is known as a legendary creature with ambivalent functions, very present in medieval popular culture. In the respective cartoon, the unicorn is a nice little horse, using his horn in order to activate his supernatural powers. The plot is very simple: the unicorn is sought by the forest animals, to be proclaimed as king of the enchanted woods. But first he must prove that he is kind, intelligent, brave and strong. Therefore, the unicorn is set a number of tasks, which he achieves with the magical power of his horn. Every time, the children and animals reiterate statements like: "*the magic horn is great*", "*the unicorn uses his magic horn to help the others*", "*the unicorn always wants to help, this is why he will make a great king*" (min 22, 29).

The disquieting idea implied by this cartoon is that magic involves participation. To activate the horn's magic, the children are taught to stamp their feet. At the end they are asked, in order to reinforce the message conveyed by the video, what they liked best about this adventure. Unsurprisingly, they preferred the moment when "*we stamped our feet in order to activate the magic*". Finally, the unicorn is crowned and enthroned in the middle of a group of children, enthusiastically acclaiming him and chanting: "*Today we party and we sing/ Because the unicorn is our king*" (20, 05). The idea that kindness and magic go hand in hand is also expressed in the theme song of "*My little pony. Friendship is magic*": "*Sharing kindness – it's an easy feat/ and magic makes it all complete*", where the pony princess also bears a horn on her forehead[171].

The television series Simsala Grimm "rewrites" the classical stories by the Grimm Brothers, Christian Andersen and other well-known authors. In every episode, a classical fairy tale for children is enacted by means of the *Magical Book*: "*Long ago, when miracles still happened, there was a magic spell which opened the gateway to the enchanted land of Simsala, the place where all the fairy-tale characters really lived: Abracadabra. Simsala Grimm!*". The book of magic brings to life two toys – Doc Croc and Yoyo, who help or inspire the characters in each tale; the same book carries the friendly little animals to the magic land known as Simsala. The adventures of Doc Croc and Yoyo alter the classical fairy tales beyond recognition. Children thus become familiar with a typical New Age idea: everything is relative, and can be regarded in different perspectives[172].

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[171] *Micul meu ponei. Prietenia este magică* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vaMFxNa5oak, (accessed on 25 May 2024)

[172] Neil Anderson, *Păzește-ți copiii de satanism, de New Age, de ocultism (Protect Your Children From Satanism, New Age, Occultism),* Logos Publishing House, 2011. See

The Mickey Mouse Clubhouse, the well-known Walt Disney TV series so much loved by children as well as parents for its educational intentions, presents magic in a different way. The characters have no enchanted book, but they have *Toodles* instead – a magical tool, a flying "brain" of sorts, which assists the characters in solving difficult situations by providing them with the right "mouseketools". Toodles has a Mickey Mouse shape – it actually is his alter ego – and is summoned by calling "Oh, Toodles!"

The Mickey Mouse Clubhouse aims to develop children's cognitive and social abilities, teaching them how to count, how to recognize shapes, colors, and so on. However, *The Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* can only be accessed by pronouncing the magical words "*Meeska, Mooska, Mickey Mouse*", and the adventures followed by children are laden with mystery and magic. In her turn, Doc McStuffins, the protagonist in the series of the same title, who is also highly appreciated by parents as they consider she relieves children's anxiety caused by seeing the physician, has a magical stethoscope received as a gift from her grandmother. The magical stethoscope enables plush toys to speak, or heals the sick toys.

One might well ask: *What is wrong about all this?* Magic and sorcery are omnipresent in all fairytale classics: Snow White has a witch for stepmother, the Cinderella attends the ball due to the magic worked by the fairy godmother, the Sleeping Beauty falls under the curse of a wicked witch, and so on. Even the beautiful Arabella, a children's program broadcast in Romania during the communist era, in the 1980s (always on Sunday morning!), used the magic power of an enchanted ring. There is, however, a major difference: old childhood tales and cartoons clearly defined and opposed good and evil. Traditional stories used to teach children about specific social roles and relationships; children learned to take on the good roles, or became aware that particular relationships are desirable, while others are inadequate and unnatural.

In the cartoons under discussion here, values are obviously confused. Magic and witchcraft are presented in a positive light, and their practitioners are persons who use their special powers to help others. The witch Lucinda in Sofia the First is sorry about the trouble she has caused, and finally it turns out that she actually loves people and is loved by them, employing her spells for their benefit and enjoyment. This puts forth the fake idea that there

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especially the chapter "The six principles of New Age thinking", p. 59-65 where he points out that "Each of this principle is an ingenious, subtle counterfeiting of Biblical Christanity. And because New Age philosophy has gained so much ground, children meet these principles both at school, and at home, on TV".

exists a good type of occult force – the so-called "white magic", which is not achieved with the support of either the devil or God, but rather by man's own ability[173].

We return to the distinction operated by some between "white magic" and "black magic", deeming the former to be a benign one, employing the force of the good, while the latter makes use of evil forces. However, the Christian teaching witness that there are no such nuances, no "white magic" or "black magic", but all magic is black – that is, evil. The only source of uncreated positive energy, imparted by God, is the divine grace. I confess that when I first watched *The Good Little Witch* I failed to note the occult undertones, but I was tempted to interpret the story in the theological key of the chance for improvement which every human being is granted. Occultism has a great ability to dissimulate itself, which enables it to be propagated in subtle, insidious manner, and the young – especially children – are highly vulnerable to this type of manipulation.

A further category of cartoons may features super-heroes according to the model of American action movies. In these animated series, the forces of good save the city/community threatened by the forces of evil, but they do so by resorting to equally violent, destructive means. A case in point is the well-known *PJMasks,* a French-British animated TV series based on Romuald Raciopo's book series *Les Pyjamasques* and aired by Disney Junior channel. The series follows three children who lead ordinary lives during the day, only to turn into the PJ Masks at night, when they activate their animal-shaped amulets and magically turn into their super-hero alter egos. The theme song played during the intro and credits of this animated series is relevant for the goal they pursue: "*Who goes into the night so they can save the day/ Who are these heroes to show you the way*?".

A relatively recent challenge is posed by the CGI action/adventure animated series *Miraculous: Tales of Ladybug & Cat Noir,* intended for schoolchildren and even teenagers, and which children prefer to "classical" animations. All episodes have similar plots: a demon-like supervillan possesses one of the characters, while a boy and a girl who are average teenagers in everyday life, turn into superheroes/warriors using powerful objects known as the *Miraculous* to fight against the forces of evil. Psychologists warn that animation of this kind is perceived differently by adults and children. While an adult retains the idea of good fighting evil, a child is fascinated by the power enabling the hero to defeat evil, and by the

[173] David Pestroiu, "Atitudinea Bisericii față de manifestările oculte. Biserica, între tradiție și inovație" ("The Church's attitude towards occult practices. The Church between tradition and innovation"), *Glasul Bisericii,* 7-9/2008, pp. 268-278

means one uses in order to achieve the powers which make one invincible. What struck me was the extremely high speed, indeed vertiginous, at which this series runs; even a grown-up will find it impossible to analyze or reflect on the dizzying images in rapid succession. The danger of such "psychotic aggression" on the personality of the child, which is developing, lies in the fact that *occultism is presented as both a means and a goal in personal development*[174].

Research carried out internationally into experimental psychology, the history of religions, anthropology, and visual sociology has revealed the role of images in human psychology, and shown that *we become the images we visualize,* that is, the images we contemplate may come to determine our way of thinking, our desires, or our whole life[175]. Children are the most vulnerable because their brain is developing. Preschoolers, especially, are not yet equipped with articulated structures of mental analyis and lack the intellectual capacities or the life experience that allow discernment. They are highly responsive to images, symbols, emotions, and therefore what they learn in childhood – via the visual means – is very important, because it will later turn into convictions and beliefs they hold as adults.

I also note that children aged 4-6 cannot distinguish very well between fact and fiction[176]. In this context, animated series and cartoons shape their behaviour as they provide role models, which are influential especially when the respective behaviour is perceived as normative, pertinent and accepted by society[177]. Children this age, ane even older, express themselves by *imitating*: they want to dress like their superheroes, talk like them, or at times even behave like them. Toy manufacturers are aware of this and supply almost every character ever featured by the animated series, as well as the items they use. Romania, too, hosts a true

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[174] Nicolae Achimescu, "Magia și vrăjitoria, o expresie pseudoreligioasă a lumii de ieri și de azi" ("Magic and sorcery, a pseudo-religious expression of the world – past and present" *Lumina* newspaper, 14 May 2011).

[175] Gheorghe, Virgiliu, *Revrăjirea lumii sau de ce nu mai vrem să ne desprindem de televizor (The Re-Enchantment of the World: Why We Cannot Abstain From Watching TV)*, Institutul de Cercetări Psihosiociale și Bioetică, 2016, p. 24. By the same author, see: *Efectele televiziunii asupra minții umane și despre creșterea copiilor în lumea de azi (The Effects of Television on Human Mind, and Parenting in Today's World)*, Institutul de Cercetări Psihosiociale și Bioetică, 2015; *Știința și războiul sfârșitului lumii. Fața ne-văzută a televiziunii (The End of the World: Science and Warfare. The Unseen Face of Television)*, Institutul de cercetări Psihosociale și Bioetică, 2016

[176] Crețu, Tinca, *Psihologia vârstelor (Age-Related Psychology),* Polirom, 2016, p. 148.

[177] Gabriela Aranghel, *Televiziunea în viața copiilor, importanță și influență. Desenele animate (Television in Children's Life: Importance and Influence. Cartoons),* Sitech Publishing House, Craiova, 2010, p. 25.

"Disney after Disney" culture extending the presence of cartoon characters in daily life. Many children even develop an obsession with certain characters, an obsession which parents themselves entertain. While collecting data for the present study, I came across web forums where parents asked where they could find thematic tablecloths, bedsheets, napkins, cups, etc, with the figures of the most popular characters (Ariel, Sofia, Doc McStuffins etc). Personally, I literally bump into all kinds of little toy horses and ponies, winged or not, but always sporting bright clashing colors (purple, pink, golden, silver) with which children plays around the house.

In their turn, the websites specializing in online sales advertise these products extensively: "*Would you like your daughter to be as kind and skilful as* Doc McStuffins*? Buy her clothing items, footwear, beach towels, backpacks, umbrellas or many other affordable and beautiful items, under Disney* Doc McStuffins *license*". For a consistent price of about 200 E, one can purchase from an online sales website the Doc McStuffins outfit, plus her leggings and flower headband, and on another website one can buy the playset Sofia I (The Wizard's Laboratory), including the Sofia figurine, the magical library and the book of spells. In addition, a booklet entitled "I am learning to read" has been published, based on the episode "The lesson of Magic". The booklet is very small and thin, but it is sold for 25 RON and introduces children into magical initiation.

Maybe not even this – the interest in cartoon figures or items – is bad in itself, obviously leaving aside the substantial financial effort of parents who buy these much-awaited objects. The problem is that among these items are negative characters (witches, monsters) or other strange figures (trolls, dwarves) with hideous looks. This attempt at familiarizing children with the villains or negative characters in cartoons does not bode well for the future[178]. The cartoon producers do not confine themselves at presenting such young children with a negative character of hideous aspect, unpleasant even for the grown-ups. Children can now actually hold this figure, handle it, play with it, get used to its ugliness. A website advertising children's products announces: "*We offer you the most beautiful coloring books with the cartoon witches, for the imagination and education of your child*". Once witches become the educators of preschoolers, and the latter grow up to be acquainted with ugly, grotesque figures, it is not surprising that later the same children will look forward to the Halloween.

[178] Oana Nistor, *Lumea rea din desenele animate (The Evil World of Cartoons),* "Lumina" newspaper, 19 April 2010

I also note that all cartoons, both the ones broadcast on TV and those available on the Internet, are interrupted by various commercials intended for the adults. Exposing children to these commercials and even the advertising consumption poses another major challenge, as surveys have revealed. I confess being preoccupied with this question for a long time. Why do we allow our children to watch cartoons with questionable contents, as well as films or other TV programs that are inappropriate for their age; why do we later allow them to browse the Internet freely, or develop addictions to violent games? Out of complacency, because we are so busy and it is so convenient to know that the child is sitting quietly in front of the computer screen or the TV, while we attend to our tasks. Or maybe for lack of information: we are not familiar with the contents of animations, films or games, or even if we are aware of it, we do not believe they might have a negative impact on our children's psychological welfare and their behaviour. Or out of our desire to comply with a general trend, because all other parents do it and, after all, we live in the digital era and we cannot avoid the virtual world.

In conclusion, we may assert that some of the recent cartoon series insidiously disseminate certain ideas, notions, or attitudes pertaining to the New Age movement, by means of extremely simple (even simplistic) tales strewn with clichés. The producers of these cartoons are the young generation of the 1960s-1970s, when the West witnessed a surprising surge of occultism and its subcultures. As Mircea Eliade remarked, the young of the time displayed complete dissatisfaction with the existing institutions – be they religious, ethical, social and political and a strong desire to break with the past, more exactly, with the world so loaded with significance, to which their parents and grandparents belonged. In this context, interest in the occult indicated their wish to revive the old beliefs and religious ideas rejected or at least disliked by the Christian churches[179].

4. Conclusion.

The success of neo-paganism in contemporary society is undeniable. As we have seen, familiarity with pagan ideas begins in childhood. The fact that adult people also become 'enchanted' is more difficult to explain. It is mainly accounted for by the encouraging of imagination, intellectual satisfaction, the feminist undertones, freedom to opt for whatever one finds convenient. Sociologists have hypothesised that all these forms of neo-paganism show that there is a desire to leave behind, to reject the Western

[179] Mircea Eliade, *Ocultism, vrăjitorie și mode culturale (Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions),* Humanitas, 1996, p. 116-117

model of society, i.e. a rational, technical, precise world that no longer entertains any illusions[180]. In contrast, paganism allows a new worldview that is totally different from that of traditional religions. It calls itself a religion but has no central hierarchy or dogma, it encourages religious diversity and does not consider it necessary for everyone to share common beliefs or be organised in the same structure, it promotes an individualised spirituality, a lifestyle in harmony with universal energy. Consequently, it is a form of religiosity or a spiritual quest.

Modern paganism is unlike any other new religious movement as described by scholars: it does not depend on charismatic leaders, it does not demand its followers to cut ties with their families, it does not challenge society. *A major feature of neo-Paganism is that ritual is not about worshipping deities, but about cultivating personal abilities – self-control, self-awareness, foretelling, psychokinesis, mental healing.* Neo-pagan tenets do not indicate the beliefs a person should adopt, but rather are statements that embody the pagan worldview. They merely point to the direction in which one's spiritual and personal development as a self-proclaimed Pagan should be directed. In brief, it is up tp each individual to choose a particular faith, a suitable deity and a relationship they establish with that deity; everyone is in charge with their spiritual and personal development[181].

Thus neo-paganism appears as a "religion" of relativism and globalism, a religion of the times we live in. It is relativist due to its view that everyone perceives reality differently, and this generates a mosaic of beliefs and rituals; globalist – since its adherents are eclectic because they borrow symbols, deities and ritual practices from other cultures and use them outside their original space and time context. *Modern-day paganism can in no way be considered a continuation of pre-Christian paganism,* which even its sympathisers admit[182].

Not least, the growth of neo-paganism has been encouraged by a certain spiritual and religious climate of contemporary society, where

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[180] Michael York, *Pagan Theology,* p. 41.

[181] Joyce and River Higginbolham, *An Introduction to Earth-Centerd Religion,* p. 39

[182] Michael Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures. Comparative Perspectives,* 2005, p. 10, states that the religious traditions observed by modern Pagans are inspired by or based on the Pagan religions of the past, but they are not the same as the old traditions and may even depart considerably from the older religions. Today's Pagans cannot claim to continue religious traditions in uninterrupted descending line from ancient times to the present day. They are modern people with much respect for the spirituality of the past, creating a new religion (modern paganism) out of the remnants of the past which they interpret, adapt, alter according to modern ways of thinking. Modern paganism is both old and new, an old-new hybrid, like a tree with roots deep in the ground and branches reaching the sky.

religious indifference is dominant and a subculture with religious overtones proliferates. There is also the enormous contribution of the Internet and the mass-media, through which hitherto isolated neo-Pagans are now able to communicate, organize and influence each other.

HEALING AND SPIRITUALITY. THE CASE OF REIKI.

Following the publication of my study on religious and spiritual alternatives in Romanian society, which included a chapter on the reiki healing method, I conducted additional research on this topic at the ICSA Congress in Bordeaux in 2017. I plan to continue this research to examine the continuity and discontinuity within reiki, as well as its dual role as a healing therapy with oriental roots and a method for spiritual growth beyond the confines of the new age.

There is no doubt that healing is a sensitive subject for modern man, and that is why many people turn, consciously and voluntarily, to complementary therapies, including reiki, or to other miracle solutions to gain or maintain their health. The phenomenon of New Age healing became visible in Western popular culture in the 1980s; he followed the interest in developing human potential and holistic healing in the 1960s and 1970s. And these two phenomena, in turn, had their roots in Theosophy, New Thought, and Spiritualism in the 19th century [183]. Unfortunately, I did not get access to national surveys led by professionals in the field which have been conducted in Romania so far (if any) in order to determine the percentage of the population using CAM methods, the socio-demographic profile, and the motivations of those who use these methods. Additionally, the studies conducted by foreign specialists, whom I consulted to understand the specifics of CAM in Central and Eastern Europe, do not consider the case of Romania[184].

1. Reiki: history and recent developments.

Reiki is a term that designates at the same time the universal force of life, the knowledge obtained from the initiatory knowledge of this force and the techniques related to conveying this force. Reiki practitioners claim that it allows the re-balancing of the flow of energy in bodies and things, placing the users in direct contact with the natural energy and empowering them to preserve it. Activating this energy, they say, allows diseases and imbalances to be treated without conflicting with traditional medicine [185]. Reiki

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[183] Jeff, Levin, „New Age Healing: Origins, Definitions, and Implications for Religion and Medicine, Religions, 13, 777, p. 1-19

[184] Souček, Ivan, „Medical Pluralism During and after Socialism: a Study of Prychotronics in the former Czechoslovakia", *Česky lid* 107 (2020), p. 51-69

[185] Mayer, Jean-François, *Les Nouvelles Voies Spirituelles. Enquête sur la religiosité parallèle en Suisse,* L'âge d'Homme, 1993, p. 20.

practitioners speak freely about their ability to put cancer into remission or cure other serious illnesses that doctors often declare themselves unable to heal.

As a Japanese "healing technique", reiki was discovered and developed by Mikao Usui (1865-1926)[186]. In his youth, Usui practiced *kiko*, the Japanese version of Chinese Qi Gong, a practice aimed at improving mental health through meditation, breathing exercises and slow movements. It focuses on the use of vital ki energy and includes healing methods based on the application of the palms to the body (massage). Kiko requires the person to build up a reserve of healing energy by practising these exercises before using it for healing.

Mikao Usui is said to have studied medicine, psychology, religion and spiritual development. Thanks to his education, he held important administrative positions for several years, serving as head of the Department of Welfare and Health in the Japanese government and later as mayor of Tokyo. In 1914 he gave up public life and decided to become a Buddhist monk to meditate on how to heal without prior energy storage.

At one point, Usui retreated to Mount Kurama and fasted for 21 days. He used to meditate standing under a small artificial waterfall and letting the stream of water fall on his head in order to open the crown chakra. At the end of this period, a strong spiritual light (Reiki energy) is said to have entered through the crown of his head and he became enlightened. He then understood that he had received great power and could heal other people without his energy running out[187]. In the same year that he received "enlightenment" (1922), he moved to Tokyo and founded the Usui Reiki Healing Society (Usui Reiki Ryoho Gakkai). At the same time, he

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[186] On the history of Reiki, see Walter Lübeck, Frank Arjava Petter, William Lee Roland, *Spiritul Reiki. Manual complet al Sistemului Reiki,* Meteor Press, 2009, pp. 13-42; Jennie Austin, *Practica Reiki,* Meteor Press, 2009, pp. 43-53; Risvan Vlad Rusu, *Compendiu ilustrat de Reiki,* Dao PSI, 2007, pp. 12-13.

[187] Legend has it that as Mikao Usui left Mount Koriyama, he was in possession of the healing method used by Buddha and Jesus. Descending the mountain, he experienced what is known as 'the four miracles'. The first: descending the mountain he injured his feet soles and instinctively stopped and put his hands on them. His palms warmed and his soles healed. Then he came to a house that served as a shelter for pilgrims climbing the mountain and asked for the usual food. Although he had been fasting for 21 days, he was able to eat normally without any stomach problems. This was the second miracle In the same house, the woman serving food had a severe toothache, which Dr Usui cured by placing his palms on either side of the woman's face. This was the third miracle. Returning to the monastery, he found the superior bedridden with a bout of arthritis and healed him with his healing hands. This is the fourth miracle (Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki tradițional. De la gradul I la maestru*, Teora 2008, p. 15).

also opened a clinic near Meiji Temple in downtown Tokyo, where he performed Reiki treatments and taught classes.

Usui did not want Reiki to be practised only by a few, to be limited or controlled in any way, but to be accessible to everyone and to spread all over the world. He died in 1926 in Tokyo, and was succeeded by Juzaburo Ushida. When he died, the first dissidence occurred: one of the 16 teachers trained by him, Chujiro Hayashi, who had received the rank of Shinpiden (master), broke away from the Society and set up his own Reiki association and clinic, where he developed his own style of Reiki healing.

Reiki was introduced to the West by Hawayo Takata (1900-1980), a Japanese woman born in Hawaii. Takata, who suffered from several illnesses, treated herself at the Reiki clinic run by Dr Hayashi and was completely cured, according to her own testimony. She completed the Reiki course in this clinic, then returned to Hawaii and established a clinic near Hilo and another in Honolulu. Takata then traveled all over the world to provide training and perform treatments. Her course took just one weekend, and the training fee was 10,000 $[188]. By the time of her death in 1980, Hawayo Takata had initiated 22 masters. She left Phyllis Furumoto, the daughter of one of her children, as her successor.

Many believe that the Reiki system she taught, however, left behind many of Dr Usui's teachings and added many of her own principles and rules. On the other hand, the fee charged was considered prohibitive for many and so, contrary to the founder's wishes, the spread of Reiki was limited. Many of her disciples decided to teach Reiki for moderate fees, and others even gave free classes.

Another issue is that Takata altered the history of Reiki to make it more accessible to the Westerners. She claimed that Dr. Usui was a Christian priest who had attended university in the United States and was president of the Christian University of Japan[189]. Today it is known that Dr Usui was never a Christian, but a Buddhist, and inquiries into his education show that he never studied at Doshisha Christian University, let alone served as its president.

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188 Walter Lübeck, Frank Arjava Petter, William Lee Roland, *Spiritul Reiki. Manual complet al Sistemului Reiki,* Meteor Press, 2009, p. 22.

189 The "Christian version" of Usui's life claims that he taught at a Christian school for boys where they studied the Bible and was fascinated by the miracles performed by Jesus. One day, his students asked him what he thought of Jesus' healings and whether he believed people could perform such healings. Usui was very puzzled and could not answer, so he decided to become a Buddhist monk. See Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki traditional*, p. 12; Jennie Austin, *Practica Reiki,* Meteor Press, 2009, p. 44.

Some Reiki practitioners believe that this “mythology” invented by Takata should be seen in the very delicate context following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, when any reference to Japan elicited a negative response, both in Hawaii and in the United States. However, they do not dispute her role in propagating Reiki[190]. Tataka also claimed that all the Reiki masters trained by Usui died in the war and that she was the only master left in the world, the only source of Reiki information. This claim, for a long while difficult to verify because of cultural and language barriers, has also proven inaccurate.

It is certain that Hawayo Tataka learned Reiki from Dr. Hayashi who had broken away from the Reiki Association founded by Dr. Usui and created an original Reiki style. After his arrival in the West, this Reiki “dissident” became rich, moving further away from the system devised by Dr Usui. Today, there are about 30 different types of Reiki, as well as many sub-groups and branches. It is hard for a Westerner to understand what the “Reiki tradition” really is, since Hawayo Takata propagated her understanding of this tradition. For this reason, it is appropriate to use the expression “Western” or “modern” Reiki for the technique taught by Hayashi and Takata and “Japanese” or “traditional” Reiki for the technique discovered by Dr. Usui, which continues to be practiced in Japan today.

There are several international associations that propagate the Reiki method[191], and there are also numerous independent Reiki masters. According to *American International Reiki Association*, Reiki masters have multiplied since the 1980s, without being cognizant of the whole set of Reiki practices and teachings. According to AIRA, what is known today as Reiki is not the intact, original system devised by Mikao Usui in Japan. However, it is considered that a healing technique can be called Reiki if it has the following characteristics: Reiki techniques are conveyed from teacher to disciple, and not acquired through meditation or exercise; Reiki

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[190] Walter Lübeck, Frank Arjava Petter, William Lee Roland, *Spiritul Reiki. Manual complet al Sistemului Reiki,* Meteor Press, 2009, p. 28, state that it is important to focus on the positive things she did, to respect and honor her for bringing Reiki to the West, continuing to practice and train in difficult times.

[191] International Reiki Federation, based in Great Britain (http://www.Reiki-federation.co.uk/); International Center for Reiki Trening, based in Michigan (http://www.Reiki.org/); International Reiki Association based in Washington (http://www.internationalReikiassociation.com/home/index.php?site_config_id=11&page_selection=72&s_page, accessed on 25 May 2024)

does not require anyone to guide the energy, as it is guided by a supreme power; Reiki cannot cause harm[192].

Reiki was inspired by Chinese Taoism, where the term ki (qi) is used for all vital energies. Ki (they say) circulates in the human body in different forms, Reiki being one of them. Reiki could be translated as "soul force" or "spiritual power", being that type of vital energy that is, in the material world, closest to the divine creative force, the source of life. Dr Usui therefore started from traditional Chinese medicine and developed a method of holistic healing by transmitting the universal life energy (Reiki) from one person to another. As a modern healing method, Reiki has departed from the simplicity of Usui's method and added other Eastern or even esoteric beliefs: balancing the chakras, the influence of the aura, special positions for treating certain illnesses, rules for healthy eating, spiritual guides, etc.

According to traditional Chinese medicine, the human body is traversed by 12 meridians or energy pathways that supply vital energy to the physical body and the subtle body[193]. If the flow of energy is disturbed or interrupted, serious illness and even death will result. The meridians lie beneath the skin, and the places where they come below the surface of the skin, are called acupuncture points. The 12 meridians are: lung, large intestine, small intestine, stomach, gallbladder, bladder, kidney, liver, spleen and pancreas, heart, pericardium, and the so-called triple warmer.

Traditional Chinese medicine also developed the theory of yin/yang principles, which manifest as polarities. For example: cold (yin) and warm (yang), ascending energy (yin) and descending energy (yang). Some parts of the body correspond to yin, others to yang. A healthy body is said to be one where a perfect balance between yin and yang is maintained, and the Reiki system helps to establish this balance.

Reiki also uses the notion of chakras, found in Buddhism and Hinduism, i.e. energy points or centres where the subtle body connects with the physical body. They are believed to catch the ki, the life force that is found everywhere around us, and introduce it into the subtle energy system. According to this theory, there are seven main chakras: base (root), sacral, solar plexus, heart, throat, eyebrow (third eye), crown. There are also secondary chakras in the hands, feet, knees and other parts of the body[194].

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[192] Walter Lübeck, Frank Arjava Petter, William Lee Roland, *Spiritul Reiki. Manual complet al Sistemului Reiki,* Meteor Press, 2009, p. 26.

[193] Constantin Gheorghiță, *InfoReiki,* Dao Psi, 2009, pp. 19-20.

[194] Jennie Austin, *Practica Reiki,* Meteor Press, 2009, p. 199, pp. 199-204; Constantin Gheorghiță, *InfoReiki,* Dao Psi, 2009, pp. 16-17; Risvan Vlad Rusu, *Compendiu ilustrat de Reiki,* Dao PSI, 2007, pp. 23-42.

Finally, Reiki employs the theosophical notion of aura, namely a field of subtle energy that extends beyond the physical body. Reiki teaches that an illness begins first in the aura, and can be generated by karma from past lives or by negative ki formed by the subconscious during the current lifetime[195]. If certain negative energies enter the aura and are not removed in time, then they can pass into the chakras and from there they can eventually spread to the physical body, manifesting as diseases. The aura has seven layers or levels of vibration, corresponding to each chakra, the level closest to the body being connected to the base (root) chakra.

Reiki cannot be practiced without initiation. Initiation consists of a series of procedures aimed at "attuning the initiates to the frequencies of Reiki energy", so that they can access it and transmit it onwards to their own body (physical and energetic) or to other people, animals, plants, objects, etc. These procedures consist of a succession of gestures coupled with mental images, performed by the master or teacher in a precise order. Within Reiki there are several ways of initiation: initiation in the transmission of energy with the hands, initiation in the transmission of energy at a distance, initiation in the transmission of energy over time, initiation in the use of symbols.

After the "attunements" the student's evolution is individual and he/she can access the Reiki levels under the guidance of the "Master". Like most esoteric systems, Reiki has three levels, from beginner to Master, to which the "Master Teacher" is added. The aim of the first degree is to restore health and bring the human body to optimal functioning, harmony with fellow people, nature and the universe. The initiate will be able to perform his/her own "self-treatment" which lasts about one hour. Reiki self-treatment does not require giving up other treatments, it is compatible with allopathic treatments, physiotherapy, homeopathy or other energy treatments. During it, the practitioner can think about anything, listen to music, have a conversation or watch TV.

The second degree of initiation in Reiki covers the social sphere and refers to the transmission of energy at a distance, based on symbols. At this level one learns three specific symbols, techniques and ways of activating and using them, mental-emotional treatment, development of the energy channel, modes of spiritual evolution, etc. In the third degree, the Master Practitioner level, one receives a complex attunement focused on learning

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195 Walter Lübeck, Frank Arjava Petter, William Lee Roland, *Spiritul Reiki. Manual complet al Sistemului Reiki,* Meteor Press, 2009, p. 70: Our mind and energy fields are influenced by our past life experiences. This influence, called karma, is brought into the present life in the aura at birth, when the soul first enters the physical body.

the Master symbol, specific Master teachings, advanced techniques of spiritual evolution, advanced use of energy, new methods and techniques for treatments. The masters use special symbols, the first of which is a huge *three-dimensional cross*, which must be visualized in white (the three-dimensional symbol)[196].

There are three pillars of Reiki: Gassho Meditation, Reiji-ho or Reiki energy indication and Chiryo- which denotes the treatment method. For each of these, there are clear directions for practice. In Gassho meditation, the hands are clasped in front of the heart, the practitioner breathes in through the nose, exhaling through the mouth, sitting in the lotus position, with the back straight, attention focused on the point where the two middle fingers meet, preferably with eyes closed. The aim of Gassho meditation is to increase the practitioner's energy and induce a meditative state. It is practiced for 20-30 minutes in the morning or evening.

Reiji-ho is a method practiced by healers. The master stands in a comfortable position, clasps hands over the heart and "asks the energy" to flow freely. He also prays for the client to heal. With his hands clasped in front of the "third eye", he asks the Reiki energy to direct the hands where healing is needed. The hands are then expected to be directed to the part of the body that is suffering, and this is felt, Reiki practitioners say, as a tingling in the hands, a certain warmth or magnetic sensation.

As for Reiki treatments (*chiryo*), they differ from one Reiki method to another. I mention the remote healing technique (*enkaku chiryo*), which is practised using a photograph of the person in need of healing. If there is no photo, a picture of the person is drawn on one of the fingers or knees with the hand. Reiki practitioners point out that it is not advisable to send energy to a person who has not specifically asked for it.

Based on the photograph, the diagnosis of the person in question can be identified (?!). To do this, the master needs a photo of at least 10x6 cm that shows the subject standing, and slowly moves fingers from head to toe. The hand is said to feel warm as it reaches the affected organ, and in the case of paralysis or tumours, the hand collapses or feels cold. Beside the photograph, energy can be sent to a person during a telephone conversation;

[196] On the training levels (Reiki degrees), see Risvan Vlad Rusu, *Compendiu ilustrat de Reiki,* Dao PSI, 2007: first degree (pp. 53-84); second degree (pp. 85-126), third degree (Master), pp. 127-150. No doubt there are variations from one Reiki system to another and from one master to another. For example, in the system taught by Hristenco, after the first and second degree, one follows courses for Teacher I and II before moving on to the Master course.

to the composer of a piece of music, the author of a book, the painter of a painting for the understanding of the work in question[197].

Practitioner Jennie Austin even introduces us to a remote treatment method that can heal several people at once: "Write all the names in a notebook or on a card that you put in a special box. Then, instead of holding up one person's name to treat them, you can hold the notebook or box, sending Reiki energy to all of them simultaneously"[198]. Reiki courses also claim that energy can also be sent to deceased people to help them find their way to the light and to support them in a possible reincarnation[199].

The Reiki books and manuals I have consulted mention that in many cases the client may feel unwell following treatment. This is attributed to toxins being removed from within the cells[200]. It is also pointed out that reflexes may not be as fast due to relaxation, that certain symptoms may appear such as drowsiness or, on the contrary, increased energy; excessive salivation, sweating, changes in the menstrual cycle[201]. However, they insist that these are all beneficial reactions, demonstrating that the body is cleansing and healing itself.

One aspect of Reiki practice is the charging of things with energy, which is tantamount to a blessing[202]. Virtually anything can be charged with Reiki energy: the food we cook, the drinks we drink, the gifts we send, the bath water, the plants in the garden, the animals, the computers that don't work, the jars that won't open, the traffic lights that don't turn green, etc[203]. In one of master Dumitru Hristenco's books, to which we will refer below, we find a relevant passage about how far one can go with this charge of energy. To the question of whether the energetic charging of his books is

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[197] Vasile Stanciu, *Aproape totul despre Reiki,* Europolis Constanța, 1997, p. 27; Hristenco, *Reiki tradițional,* pp. 74-75.

[198] Jennie Austin, *Practica Reiki,* Meteor Press, 2009, p. 179.

[199] *Reiki course.* 2nd degree (material from a former Reiki practitioner), p.4

[200] Walter Lübeck, Frank Arjava Petter, William Lee Roland, *Spiritul Reiki. Manual complet al Sistemului Reiki,* p. 223.

[201] Jennie Austin, *Practica Reiki,* Meteor Press, 2009, p. 67, warns about driving, working with various tools or walking around town in heavy traffic areas, since one needs time to regain full consciousness.

[202] Jennie Austin, *Practica Reiki,* Meteor Press, 2009, p. 72, states that this can be considered a kind of blessing. The person who eats and drinks them will receive an internal Reiki treatment. It can be very useful, if a quick fortifier is needed, but there is no time or proper place for a treatment.

[203] „The person who receives it (an energised gift) will feel an attraction to it, will place it in plain sight, because they will feel good looking at it or using it. The same can be done if we want to sell an object. By energising the object, it will attract people's attention and appear to them as it really is". Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki tradițional. De la gradul I la maestru*, Teora, 2008, p. 63.

done with pure uninformed energy, the answer was: “Yes. They will only be bought by readers who can benefit from them (consciously or unconsciously). I haven’t energized them with the information to sell to anyone. They constantly radiate universal energy and sensitive people feel it, while the compatible people feel the attraction. Some people have reported that they apply this book to a painful area and the pain disappears, or put it under their pillow and get rid of insomnia. It is possible, although this is not the purpose for which my books are written”[204].

“Charging with energy” is performed with Reiki symbols. They are a kind of key that allows access to the universal life energy (Reiki), acting remotely, in time and space on objects, people or events. To activate a symbol means to draw it in the air with the centre of the palm, with a finger or three fingers, with the third eye, to visualise it and to spell out its name three times, mentally[205]. The symbol is activated on the palm before self-treatment, before treatment applied to another person or remote treatment. There are several variations of Reiki symbols, one of the most popular being the Cho-Ku-Rei (CKR) symbol. This is a power symbol, they claim, which allows instant access to the energy of the Reiki Universe and signifies “placing all the powers of the universe here / all the energy of the Universe is here and now”. This symbol is believed to offer spiritual and energetic protection, focus energy and accelerate the flow of Reiki energy, recharge and revitalise energetically[206].

Reiki practitioners claim that this sign, once activated on a painful area, reduces pain, and on an injury- helps to heal it faster; activated on food, liquids, medicines, crystals, jewellery- purifies and energises them; activated on chakras- recharges them quickly and revitalises energetically. Activated on the palms, it increases the healing power; activated on batteries or household appliances, it increases their lifespan; the symbol is used to find a lost object, to increase the value of a gift; to bless someone, this sign is made above the 7th chakra[207]. Reiki masters propose certain experiments to demonstrate to their apprentices the effectiveness of energizing an object: “Try a little experiment. Pour wine from the same bottle into two glasses, giving light to one of the glasses by applying a Cho Ku Rei. Taste the wine

[204] Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki modern,* Teora, 2002, p. 50. See also the following statement: „The information contained in this book has an energy load that is not visible to the uninitiated, but will be useful to them. Even the book itself has an important energetic value, accessible to all. Try it and you will see for yourself”. Cf Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki tradițional. De la gradul I la maestru*, Teora, 2008, p. 9.

[205] *Reiki course.* 2nd degree (material from a former Reiki practitioner), p. 1.

[206] Hristenco, *Reiki tradițional*, p. 66-68; Rusu, pp. 86-119.

[207] *Reiki course.* 2nd degree (material from a former Reiki practitioner), p. 2.

from the glass to which the symbol has not been applied and then from the glass to which the symbol has been applied. You will notice differences in taste, which in theory should be impossible given the common origin of the wine in the two glasses"[208]. Moreover, even if it seems fantastic, as Reiki masters themselves admit, Cho Ku Rei has the ability to change the temperature or the weather. For this purpose, the symbol is applied to the sky, with the intention of changing the weather (!?)[209].

Engraved on Mikao Usui's tombstone are the five principles that guided him throughout his life: just for today, do not anger, just for today, do not worry; just for today, be grateful; just for today, work hard; just for today, be kind to others[210]. These principles, which can be found in certain variations in all Reiki systems, underline the importance of the present time, i.e. that the human being can be happy, love, discover who he/she is, feel the pulse of life, only *here and now*. Only in the present moment do we have the opportunity to influence life and change it for the better.

The most important feature of modern Reiki is flexibility, both for the masters, who can teach Reiki in complete freedom, experiment and develop new techniques, and for those interested, who can learn Reiki, they say, without abandoning their own religion or spiritual tradition[211]. This is why Western Reiki (i.e. the Reiki promoted in America and Europe) includes many additional techniques, unknown in Japan. In one way Reiki is presented and understood in the Japanese culture, and in another way it is perceived by Westerners. From the original Reiki system, created by Mikao Usui and based on healing by hand touch, a multitude of other systems have evolved. According to data taken from the Romanian website http://www.cursuri-Reiki.ro/karuna-Reiki.html, alongside traditional Reiki (also in the variants Usui Shiki Ryoho, Gendai Reiki Ho, Komyo Reiki), there are several modern variants of which the best known are: Karuna

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208 Risvan Vlad Rusu, *Compendiu ilustrat de Reiki,* Dao PSI, 2007, p. 92.

209 *Ibidem,* p. 94.

210 Walter Lübeck, Frank Arjava Petter, William Lee Roland, *Spiritul Reiki. Manual complet al Sistemului Reiki,* p. 260; Jennie Austin, *Practica Reiki,* Meteor Press, 2009, pp. 55-61: Just for today, do not worry; Just for today,do not be angry; Just for today, count your blessings; Just for today, work hard and be honest, to yourself as to others; Just for today, respect all beings. Hristenco recommends the following version of Reiki affirmations: "Starting today/ I am no longer worried/ I am no longer afraid/ I do my work honestly/ I will give thanks for my blessings/ I will be kind to all living creatures" (Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki tradițional. De la gradul I la maestru*, Teora 2008, p. 33).

211 Walter Lübeck, Frank Arjava Petter, William Lee Roland, *Spiritul Reiki. Manual complet al Sistemului Reiki,* p. 107; cf p. 142, Reiki offers us a personal encounter with divinity, regardless of church, sect or holy scripture.

Reiki, Shamballa Reiki, Order of Melkizedec, InfoReiki, Ascension Reiki etc.

I was astonished to witness the strange stances some Reiki Masters would take. Recently, a new branch known as Money Reiki (www.moneyReiki.com) has emerged, defining itself as a "new system that helps solve money-related problems." By initiating the Money Reiki system, the person will raise the vibration of money on earth. Simultaneously, karma or negative thinking may lead to the removal of money-related energy blockages. Money Reiki allows for initiation up to the third degree, and it is also available in Romania (www.Reikiromania.com). Despite the disclaimer that Money Reiki doesn't ensure wealth, its influence persists due to modern man's innate response to any word combination containing "money".

2. Key concepts in reiki teaching and practice.

Mikao Usui (1865–1926) discovered and developed Reiki, an ancient Japanese healing practice, after a mystical encounter on the holy mountain Kurama. Usui was able to heal many sick people by laying on his hands, convinced that he had found the source of healing, namely the life-giving energy of the universe. Takata Hawayo, a Japanese-American, popularized reiki in the West after learning it from Hayashi Chujiro, who claimed to be Usui Makao's successor.[212]. In the European context, Reiki means the universal force of life, the modalities to handle with this force. The adepts of reiki believe that this practice is able to connect the user with the universal energy. It is enough to activate this energy and diseases are healed in an almost miraculous way[213]. Reiki came in Romania immediately after the events of 1989 that led to the fall of communism but it became known especially after the year 2000, when there was an explosion of alternative and natural therapeutic practices across the country.

Reiki, alongside other unconventional therapies, practiced in a clean, quiet environment, became fashionable in a country "tired" by the deeply rooted vices of a poor medical system. The patients, delighted that they found a non-invasive therapy, convenient, which did not contravened any treatment, claimed that pains were improving or even convinced that some of the conditions they have suffered were healed. Reiki healing therapy received a legal basis in 2007, when it was recognized as alternative therapy, by Law no. 118, regarding the organization and functioning of

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[212] Partridge, Christopher, Encyclopedia of New Religions. New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities, Lion Hudson, 2004 (David Miller, „Reiki”, p. 231-233)

[213] See Jean-François MAYER, *Les Nouvelles Voies Spirituelles. Enquête sur la religiosité parallèle en Suisse,* L’âge d’Homme, 1993, p. 20

complementary / alternative medicine activities and practices, together with other therapies, such as acupuncture and electroacupuncture, electric and non-magnetic stimulation, magnetic field therapy, crystal therapy, chromotherapy etc. That law defines complementary and/or alternative medicine (CAM) as "those health care practices that are not integrated into the main system of medical health services but are used as adjunctive therapies or can replace classical therapies." Additionally, it states that these practices are based on "the theories, beliefs, and experiences of different national cultures used for the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of somatic and mental diseases."

The law also states that: a) doctors, dentists, and pharmacists; b) psychologists; and c) graduates of other higher education institutions can engage in complementary or alternative medicine activities and practices, provided they obtain a free practice authorization from the Ministry of Health. The law's promulgation led to the establishment of the Order of Practitioners of Complementary/Alternative Medicine, a professional, non-governmental, apolitical organization that continues to regulate and supervise the practice of complementary/alternative medicine [https://www.opmca.ro/]. We also add the fact that this legislative framework that regulates CAM practices in Romania has not changed since 2007, and that no specific rules for the application of the law have been developed until now.

It is believed that seeking health outside of classical medicine represents nothing more than the patient's desire to have an active role in gaining or maintaining their own health. He wants to be the subject and not the object of various therapeutic methods and practices, as in classical medicine[214]. People who turn to CAM practices are dissatisfied with the fact that the doctor-patient relationship is generally defined by relationships of authority and power. They argue that the doctor can exaggerate the risks of a disease, communicate poorly with the family in the case of a terminal diagnosis, not pay due attention to elderly patients, and sometimes link the medical act to material benefits. On the contrary, CAM therapists spend much more time with the patient, listen to their perceptions of the disease and suffering, and take an interest in aspects of the patient's life that are apparently unrelated to the condition itself, such as sleep, appetites, moods, etc. Moreover, the consultation takes place in a pleasant space that bears no resemblance to the hospital or classic medical offices.

[214] Kewin Dew, *Complementary and Alternative Medicine. Containing and Expanding Therapeutic Possibilities. Critical Approaches to Health,* p. 101-102

The success of CAM in Romania, as elsewhere where these therapies are practiced, could only be understood in the context of the individual attention given to each patient and the holistic approach to disease and healing. The late sociologist Vintilă Mihăescu showed in 2015 that health is an important personal problem for a quarter of the Romanian population, compared to the European average, which was, at the time, 16%. He also spoke of a "culture of health" in Romania, in the sense that health comes first in the hierarchy of personal concerns before the future of children or wages[215].

"Reiki is one of the most significant expressions of holistic healing in Western society today," according to Gordon Melton, one of the most important specialists in the study of new religious movements[216]. In Romania, reiki therapy enjoys a good reputation, being considered a universal panacea that leads to healing regardless of the faith of the one who practices it, a solution to the problems and challenges of contemporary society (stress, pollution, food additives), or a means of spiritual evolution[217]. As we will see further, reiki, as one of the spiritual metamorphoses, advanced and imposed itself in Romania simultaneously with the New Age current, amidst the sudden and unpredictable transformations that characterized the post-communist period[218]. James Beckford, a well-known religious sociologist, demonstrates that moments of "turn inwards" appear in times of intense social change. Any violent or long-lasting disruption of a social and moral order generates a type of response in which the search for meaning, order, and values in this life depends on the resources inside the person[219].

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[215] Mihăilescu Vintilă, *Apologia pârleazului,* Polirom, 2015, p. 222

[216] Gordon Melton, „Reiki: The International spread of a New Age Movement" in Mikael Rothstein (ed.), Mew Age Religion and globalization, Aarhaus University Press, 2001, p. 79-93

[217] "Reiki is neither a religion nor a New Age practice; it is a treatment based on Universal Energy, the light that was born with the beginning of time and will exist endlessly. This energy has an infinite capacity and cannot be exhausted, no matter how many changes take place on a worldwide or even universal level. Orthodox, Catholics, Buddhists, and Mohammedans successfully practice Reiki, and anyone, regardless of age, gender, or professional orientation, can use it /(Risvan Vlad Rusu, Compendiu de reiki. Meditații, tehnici și metode practice, Editura Trinity, 2015, p. 13)

[218] Other reiki masters says: "Reiki arrived from the West and spread, benefiting from the support of the New Age current... While Reiki only took advantage of the New Age atmosphere, it did not actually participate in its spread." 2017, p. 21

[219] James Beckford, „*The world images of new religions and healing movements"* în *Sickness and Sectarianism. Exploratory Studies in Medical and Religious Sectarianism,* Aldershot: Gower, pp. 72–93 (p. 76)

Without a doubt, magical practices, therapies, healing methods, or occultism of any kind are marginal phenomena but omnipresent in the religious culture of the Romanian people. They also manifested during the communist regime, although it did not tolerate their presence. After the collapse of communism, but especially after Romania's integration into the European Union, this phenomenon gradually moved from the periphery to the center, in the sense that it was embedded, incorporated, and institutionalized in various professional fields (psychology, management, various government agencies, health) and at the same time was imbued with specific New Age developments or aspects[220].

Researchers who have dealt with the CAM phenomenon in Western countries have noticed similarities between its integrative approaches and New Age syncretism since the 1980s. Globalization and the Internet revolution have stimulated and facilitated both. The link between reiki and the New Age is recognized as such by the reiki masters in Romania, but their position is ambivalent. While some consider these similarities to be problematic[221], for others, they represent an opportunity for spiritual growth[222].

Strange as it may seem, reiki shares many similarities with channeling, one of the most popular New Age practices[223]. From this perspective, reiki is a form of healing in which an initiate manifests as a channel for a universal force of energy. In other words, reiki initiates become channels through which energy flows and heals. Thus, in reiki, as in channeling, some powers are transmitted through a mediating body.

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[220]Sorin Gog, „Neo-liberal subjectivies and the emergence of spiritual entrepreneurship: An analysis of spiritual development programs in contemporary Romania”, *Social Compass*, 2020, vol. 67 (1), p. 103-119

[221] "Currently, it is quite difficult for a beginner to manage through the multitude of Reiki systems, and the available information is no longer coherent. I also ran into this problem during my studies, when the various opinions of my teachers seemed to contradict each other. This incoherence made me get closer to the origin of the Reiki system, where I began to rediscover the meaning of this teaching" (http://www.cursuri-reiki.ro/sisteme-reiki)

[222] "I advise my practitioners to take initiations from several Reiki masters to know several systems, because in this way their knowledge increases and each initiation into the light also increases their number of guides" OA (in contradiction with B.L, who considers it unnecessary to extend Reiki horizontally).

[223] Mattew Ward, p. 128; „reiki practitioners seek to channel life-force energy into the body” (Partridge, Christopher, Encyclopedia of New Religions. New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities, Lion Hudson, 2004 (David Miller, „Reiki”, p. 231-233), p. 232)

Therefore, the basic pillars of reiki are initiation and lineage (succession), without which the transmission of healing energy would not be possible[224].

When defining or conceptualizing initiation, the Romanian masters are tributary to William Lee Rand[225], one of the most well-known reiki masters, the founder of the Center for Reiki Training in Detroit (today the International Center for Reiki Training- ICRT), of the Center for Reiki Research of the Reiki Membership Association; editor of the best known reiki periodical, "Reiki News Magazine"; author of the books Reiki, The Healing Touch, The Reiki Touch Kit, Reiki for a New Millennium, The Spirit of Reiki, An Evidence Based History of Reiki, also translated into Romanian. William Lee Rand is the creator of the Usui/Tibetan (1989), Karuna (1995), and Holy Fire (2014) systems. In addition, as we learn from the ICRT website, William Lee Rand is a specialist in metaphysics, a professional astrologer, hypnotherapist, past life regression therapist, and certified in NLP[226]. His impact in Romania stems not only from his translated books available in esoteric bookstores, but also from the fact that several Romanian reiki masters claim to have personally known him and received direct initiation from him[227].

William Lee Rand claims that initiation into reiki (attunement) means entering into a sacred, metaphysical order that has been present on earth for thousands of years, the purpose of which is to remove blockages from the body's energy channels and connect the practitioner to the Universal Energy Source. This conception brings to mind Mircea Eliade's statement that the profane man, whether he wants it or not, still retains traces of the behavior of the religious man, albeit emptied of any religious

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224 Risvan Vlad Rusu, Compendiu de reiki. Meditații, tehnici și metode practice, Editura Trinity, 2015, p. 7

225 Rand, William. *Reiki for a New Millennium.* Southfield, Mich.: Vision Publications, 1998; *Reiki: The Healing Touch: First and Second Degree Manual.* Southfield, Mich.: Vision Publications, 1991.

226 https://www.reiki.org/users/william-rand (accessed on 25 May 2024)

227 I spent special moments with William in Camp Ronora and Stonehenge. He inspired my future with Reiki, and at the same time, he was a Reiki leader model that I followed. Many aspects of Reiki connect me to William, and I often present techniques learned from him in my classes.https://www.facebook.com/Reiki.Romania/posts/william-lee-rand-maestru-si-profesor-reiki-pre%C8%99edinte-international-center-for-r/798414570281118/?locale=ar_AR&paipv=0&eav=AfZr1o7h-0s0t_Ey5a5C5fHOAKOHS9dU1PA5VTVgcL8C7aZPm0SEeZh3brTPBswWIa4&_rdr (accessed on 25 May 2024).

significance. This is why we still find models of initiation in the modern world, despite their strong desacralization.[228].

Some reiki masters from Romania emphasize the fact that the disciple who receives the initiation in reiki practically starts a new life. Other reiki masters who discuss initiation align with a theosophical theory, asserting that it activates a channel that allows energy to originate directly from the source, penetrate the body via the 7th chakra, traverse the aura and body meridians, and ultimately emerge through the palms.[229].

Closely related to the initiation is the lineage, which means the uninterrupted transmission of energy from the founder of reiki, Mikao Usui, until today. Reiki masters believe that it is crucial for a potential reiki practitioner to inquire about the instructor's lineage, experience, and continuity in practice and teaching, as a strong lineage directly influences the effectiveness of the applied treatment[230]. That is why reiki masters post photos of recognized personalities in this field, as well as diplomas certifying their specialization, to give more weight and significance to the courses they teach. In our view, the emphasis on lineage appears to be an imitation of apostolic succession in the Christian Church. Reiki masters

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[228] Whether he wants it or not, the non-religious man is his own creation, shaped by the state his ancestors assumed, ultimately resulting from a process of desacralization. Just as "nature" is a product of the gradual secularization of the Cosmos, the work of God, so profane man is the result of a desacralization of human existence. This means that the irreligious man has constituted, unlike his predecessor, any trace of religiosity and transhuman significance. He recognizes himself to the extent that he "liberates" and "purifies" himself from the superstitions of his ancestors. Whether he wants to or not, the profane man retains traces of the religious man's behavior, but loses any religious significance. Whatever he does, he carries a legacy and cannot abolish his past, as he is himself a product of it. Despite a series of denials and refusals, the irreligious man remains obsessed with the realities he renounced (Eliade, p. 154)

[229] The reiki master N.D, https://www.reiki.ro/originile-reiki/., (accessed on 24 May 2024)

[230] "The ability to practice Reiki comes from having received an attunement and not from developing the ability over time through the use of meditation or other exercises. All Reiki methods belong to a lineage, where the teacher transmits the technique and energy to the student through an attunement process, beginning with the technique's founder. Attunement is very important because it brings the appropriate energy. That's why students generally want to participate in Reiki courses supported by instructors who are as close as possible, in the initial line, to the developer of the respective method. ... Before enrolling in a Reiki course, request a clear explanation of the instructor's initiation line. I have previously discussed this topic 23 years ago, but at that time, it was more challenging for students to verify the line, and many aspects were extremely confusing for those aspiring to become Reiki practitioners. You now have various possibilities for checking your instructor's line. Before enrolling in a Reiki course, it is important to consider the instructor's experience and continuity in practice and teaching" (Reiki Master BL)

require not only a founder, but also the power and authority derived from him, which they pass on through successive initiations.

Sociological studies cannot label Reiki as a movement. According to sociologists, a movement in order to be labeled as such requires a common ideology, purpose, organization, and active strategy for a phenomenon such as holistic health to qualify as a movement. Rather, holistic health refers to a conglomeration of diagnoses, therapies, medical care, wellness, or unconventional and esoteric healing. The perception of these distinct strands as a unified movement stems from their shared rhetoric, serving as a credo that conceals and obscures diversity.[231].

"New Age Healing" is a term that was first introduced into the medical literature in the 1980s as the medical expression of concepts that circulated among esoteric religious traditions and new religious movements. Levin argues that there are four key elements in the New Age, namely mysticism, esoteric metaphysics, the occult, self-actualization, each of which plays its role in healing. Mysticism, present in many traditional religions, is a dynamic concept in reiki, where practitioners learn that seminars and initiation can open the door to experiences with subtle energies. Reiki also contains esoteric elements, since it speaks of subtle spirits, the interpenetration of subtle human bodies, the system of chakras and meridians, ascended masters. Many of these aspects relate to disease etiology and therapeutic means. These phenomena, Levin argues, have become a kind of lingua franca that facilitates communication between the old theosophical schools, yoga, neo-pagans or initiates of some mystery schools.

The term occult signifies concealed practices or rituals that aim to comprehend, summon, or manage natural forces and subtle schemes. These traditions include, but are not limited to, practitioners of magical rituals and members of various pagan schools. According to some authors, the primary focus of occultists lies in their pursuit of knowledge beyond the scope of science and their attempt to harness its magical powers. Finally, when it comes to self-actualization, the therapeutic use of quartz, crystals, and gems, channeling through entities, modern approaches to divination, newly developed or re-adapted methods of psychology, enhancement, interest in ancient or extraterrestrial civilizations, the rediscovery and simplification (or trivialization) of Native American rituals, environmental and climate concerns, and numerous techniques and philosophies for healing emotions, relationships, mind, and body, whether physical or subtle, The adoption of

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[231] Jeff Levin, *New Age Healing: Origins, Definitions, and Implications for Religion and Medicine*, *Religions*, 13, 777, p. 1-19, p. 2

these widely disparate beliefs or attitudes unites them for the purposes of spiritual growth, consciousness development, healing, and knowledge development.

Along with spiritual growth, a primary focus in New Age self-actualization is bodily function, i.e., health and healing. The notion of healing has expanded to such an extent that it now serves as a metaphor, encompassing not only the physical condition of an individual, but also their emotional state, attitudes, interpersonal connections, family dynamics, formal and informal community relationships, political structures, environmental conditions, and other global or cosmic matters. All these concepts have progressed in tandem with secularization, reflecting the dominance and preponderance of a materialistic cultural ethos.

Levin showed that New Age concepts in the medical and religious fields fulfill three major functions: a) a spiritually grounded worldview, which refers to the relationship between divinity and the world; b) the nature of the universe, the theory and practice of healing (the holistic conception of the body, the presence of mind-body interaction); and c) the existence of life force or bioenergy. These views of religion, science, and medicine shed light on New Age prescriptions both horizontally and vertically. New Age books often express the ethical obligations of the individual in community, emphasizing the importance of spiritual development and the responsibility of individuals to promote healing and well-being in communities, nations, and ecosystems. Subsequently, New Agers established social institutions to support their beliefs. Medical establishments included a variety of still-thriving alternative practices—reiki healing, iridology, reflexology, and alternative medicine research programs—even if they did not explicitly invoke the term New Age.

New Age beliefs and participation in New Age activities shape other aspects of the individual's life and act as a control and balancing factor for events such as illness or suffering of any kind. The transition between this world and the next in either individual terms (death, afterlife, reincarnation) or global terms (millennium, earth transformations, end of the Mayan calendar) is an important focus of New Age writing on personal development, health, politics, and environment. Belief in reincarnation and spiritualism (communication with the dead), as well as channeling, can be integral components of the New Age lifestyle, where healing and spiritual growth are intertwined and undifferentiated.

Certain New Age ideas have managed to infiltrate both classical medicine and classical religion. Many practitioners of alternative methods may perceive their therapies as non-religious, understanding that what they are doing is entirely secular. However, Pamela Klassen noted that the

concepts and practices of various healing methods have their historical roots in religious contexts. While they often lack a direct connection to a specific religion, their understanding of human nature, illness, and suffering bears a strong connection to religious traditions. These concepts are based, *grosso modo*, on the existence of transcendental forces, unmeasurable energies, or subtle empirical bodies. The success of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) directly correlates with critical perceptions of classical medicine as hegemonic (authoritarian), as well as a holistic understanding of the human body and its optimal improvement[232].

3. Reiki in Romanian context.

Reiki was introduced in Romania by Dumitru Hristenco (b. 1951), according to his own testimony. He claims that at that time two Reiki masters arrived in Romania: Alexander Fries-Tersch from Austria, who gave Reiki courses, for the first and second degrees, and Brian Wark from Canada, both his teachers, who gave courses in radiance technique, first and second degrees. Hristenco has been declared a Reiki master in Canada, in the tradition of Mikao Usui- Hayashi -Takata- Fay- Susan Proust- Evelyn Fleurman- Ana Patricia Cairns and in his turn has trained 16 Reiki masters[233]. As he states in his works, he was also a yoga practitioner, worked with the radiance technique, was initiated in alchemy, the Silva method, voodoo and others[234].

Hristenco highlights the distinction between traditional Reiki, discovered by Usui, and modern Reiki, developed after 1980, when Reiki in Japan no longer resembled that in America or Europe. Moreover, in his opinion, there is an "essential Reiki", which is much older than the one discovered by Usui[235]. This "essential" Reiki, which must underlie every branch of Reiki, is based on the following principles: all people are inherently good, we live in the world we create for ourselves, balance and harmony are the normal state of man, of society, of humanity. These principles, he says, are not based on a particular doctrine, religion or

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[232] Klassen Pamela et alli, *Critical approaches to the entanglement of religion, medicine and healing*, p. 4

[233] Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki tradițional. De la gradul I la maestru*, Teora 2008, pp. 17-19.

[234] Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki modern,* Teora, 2002, p. 28.

[235] In his book *Reiki tradițional*, Hristenco adds that Reiki was a part of the MU civilization, older than the Atlantean civilization, that was somewhere in the universe. The peoples of this civilization came to colonize the Earth, especially the Tibet and India regions, and brought Reiki with them. Reiki was also known to the Mayan civilisation, was later taken up by the Egyptians, and Osiris was the greatest Reiki master of that era (Hristenco, *Reiki tradițional*, p. 17).

philosophy, but result in the integration of the individuals in the society to which they belong, and harmony among its members[236].

Reiki is promoted in Romania through specialised centres, such as the Centre for Reiki Initiation and Training - Romania (CIPRR), founded in 2003 by Călin Petru Cotrău, which trains students and instructors in a variety of Reiki methods (www.Reikiromania.ro). The Centre is the official representative in Romania of the Gendai Reiki Ho Healing Association and the Komyo Reiki Kai Centre of Japan. The training is provided through seminars in interactive workshop style. For each seminar completed, the student receives the course material in Romanian and a certificate of attendance, while the fee for Usui Tibetan Reiki is 250 EURO.

In addition to such centres, there are individual Reiki masters who have practices specialising in complementary therapies, many of whom are also authors of books or information manuals on Reiki. Browsing through a number of books written by them, I noted the complete liberty they take of creating their own styles of Reiki, in which New Age elements are combined with radiesthesia and Christian elements, more or less distorted. One of the reiki masters states it explicitly: „During my early therapy sessions, in addition to traditional Reiki techniques I was constantly looking to add new elements, some learned in other Reiki systems, others that I considered my own. I liked to think about what else I could add, what technique I could discover, what novelty I could bring to the treatments I was doing, and by virtue of this constant searching I came across a few courses in radiesthesia. I discovered the techniques of working with informed energy and some ways of using radiesthesia in energy therapy, and since then I have been using these techniques in all the treatments I do"[237].

Radiesthesia (Lat. *radius*-beam, radiation, and Gr. *aisthêsis*-sensitivity) is the method of decoding certain energy information from the environment, using various instruments, such as a pendulum, rod or wand. Physical radiesthesia is concerned with the search for water sources or gold deposits and has applications in geology. Energetic mental radiesthesia is concerned with the search for sources of energy signals, with applications in therapy (establishing a medical diagnosis) or in 'researching the spiritual world'. There is a large body of literature on mental and energetic radiesthesia and the dangers of practising it, so I will not dwell on this subject.

New Age themes abounding in these Reiki systems are reincarnation and karma, life on other planets, or spiritual guides – which Reiki masters

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236 Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki modern,* Teora, 2002, pp. 10-12.
237 Constantin Gheorghiță, *Info Reiki*, PSI, 2009, p. 7.

themselves admit are borrowings from shamanism[238]. Some authors even point out that Reiki initiations open the way to unexpected psychic or parapsychic phenomena, such as premonitions, precognition, extrasensory perceptions, auric visualization. The world of modern Reiki also includes the *ascended masters*, i.e. people who have reached that spiritual level where they are no longer obliged to incarnate, to go through other reincarnations, or *sons of God*, i.e. those who have been assumed into heaven during their lifetime without having passed through death, respectively (in their opinion) Jesus, Elijah, Enoch or Buddha.

In my pastoral experience, I met several Reiki practitioners who claimed that there was no contradiction between this practice and the Orthodox faith. Moreover, their masters recommended that they participate in church services, undertake confession and prayer, receive the Eucharist, and use holy water. Therefore, "there can be no harm in anything that brings you closer to the Church and her services," claimed the Reiki adherents I spoke to. However, I noticed that these people were in the grip of their masters, regarded them as idols, thought according to certain patterns, expressed themselves in a certain language understood only by them, and isolated themselves from their families. In all of this, I sensed manipulation, as well as elements of the process known as „sectarianism", from a sociological perspective.

Often mentioned in this context is O.A., a well-known Reiki master and physician who practices and teaches reiki in Bucharest and throughout Romania. His followers include two other well-known Reiki masters, B.L. and R.V.R.[239]. Below, I intend to summarize the ideas he presented in his books which treats the elements of Reiki, such as initiation and its degrees, self-healing, symbols, and sending energy, in a very original way. [240].

When it comes to direct energy transmission, he suggests that one can use clothes or even the person's signature (a method he acknowledges as

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[238] „They are generally people who have lived on this planet, who choose as their personal mission to guide people in different areas or activities". There is a difference between the help received from angels and that received from guides. Angels help people unconditionally, this is their divine mission, while guides keep their human side related to sympathy or antipathy to the person concerned, may refuse a person the help requested or even ask for certain rewards in exchange for help (Gheorghiță pp. 90-91); „A notion like "spiritual guides" was unknown in the 19th century, but today it is widely used. Techniques for meeting Reiki guides are borrowed from shamanism" (Risvan Vlad Rusu, *Compendiu ilustrat de Reiki,* Dao PSI, 2007, p. 17).

[239] (http://www.cursuri-Reiki.ro/despre-mine.html),

[240] Only *Reiki. Între mit și realitate* (2008) presents the three degrees of Reiki, while in *Arta războiului PSI. Protecția* (2006) Reiki initiations are a form of protection against PSI attacks (pp. 107-108). In the other books, references to Reiki are tangential.

"voodoo") in conjunction with a photo.[241]. He also insists that Reiki can help one accomplish certain projects or fulfill certain wishes. All one has to do is write on a piece of paper the project in the present tense: “X (name) has the ideal house, car." On the other side, draw the known symbols, then imagine these symbols as drawn with light, utter their names three times, fold the sheet, and “give it light” every day for 10–15 minutes. If the wish comes true, burn the paper; if it doesn't, our writing is either incomplete or in conflict with divine laws.[242].

Also, O.A claims that energy can also be directed to aborted children, which is necessary because they dwell in the cold and darkness: “Our priests are either blind or they don’t know what mercy means. Only Father G. knew and saw the aborted children and allowed them to be remembered in the Liturgy so that they could be raised into the light of Christ. There was also Father A. who spoke of the world below, where children are grouped according to the woman who aborted them.” In such cases, we learn that light is sent until the child or children are dreamt of by their mother[243]. Light can be directed to the deceased, and even to angels or saints. Angels need light because it is the raw material for their armour, sword, spear, and the light sent by God is insufficient. In turn, the saints need light as a blessing, which they then return to the world.

Another element of modern Reiki, which O.A insists on, are the spiritual entities of light. Every person, he argues, has a guardian angel, through baptism he/she receives another one, and through Reiki initiation he/she receives several guides of the light who may or may not be angels, depending on the merits and needs of the person concerned. For example, in first degree initiation, one receives four angels who collaborate with the guardian angels of the respective person. In fact, ideas characteristic of the New Age cocktail abound in books by O.A[244].

Esoteric teachings about the soul and the self merge with yoga and Christian elements. O.A. claims that the soul has a red-orange colour and a size that varies from man to man depending on the mission of the respective person and the deeds done in previous lives[245]. The soul can be enhanced by the number of light entities obtained through initiations or battles with demons. However, the soul can also be diminished in the fight against evil,

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[241] Ovidiu Dragoș Argeșanu, *Reiki. Între mit și realitate* (2008), pp. 86-89.
[242] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI,* p. 91.
[243] Idem, *Reiki, între mit și realitate*, p. 94.
[244] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI,* p. 24, 28, 51,54.
[245] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI,* p. 39.

or even stolen through magic[246]. The self, says O.A, is the most important part of a human, it is the cause of life and its purpose. It is the deepest part of the human subconscious structure, and its emergence from the unconscious is called the awakening of the Self. The Self often comes into conflict with the angel given by God to help us. Yoga is beneficial because it leads to the emancipation of the self, to the awakening of the Kundalini serpent[247] and then, through knowledge and awareness, to its rising.

Finally, out-of-body visions and experiences specific to the New Age repertoire are very common. O.A claims to have seen the heavens open several times, to have reached the throne of God and to have conversed with Him[248], that he received help from the angels[249], and that he has all sorts of spiritual guides[250]. The description of these alleged experiences brings to mind other "visionaries" of the more distant or more recent past: Petrache Lupu, Mother Veronica of Vladimirești, Verginica – the New Jerusalem, Constantin Dogaru etc. Unsurprisingly, he praises Mother Veronica of Vladimirești who, he says, "during the Holy Liturgy was much closer to God than the priest who celebrated the service, or the local bishop who was not even worthy of kissing her feet"[251].

The most concerning thing is that he mixes Reiki and Orthodoxy under the all-encompassing New Age umbrella. In O.A.'s books and, no doubt, in the medical consultations he gives and the courses he runs, there are elements that, apparently, do not arouse the concern of the majority Orthodox Christians, even of regular churchgoers. For example, he insists

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[246] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI. Protecția* (2006), pp. 31-33. The same idea at Constantin Gheorghiță: At birth, every human comes with a certain "amount" of soul to live on this planet. The amount of soul one receives depends on the mission one has to fulfil in life and the merits one has gathered in previous lives.Constantin Gheorghiță, *Info Reiki*, PSI, 2009, p. 49. An amount of soul can be lost with breakups, great sins, or magic attacks.

[247] The kundalini serpent is that component of man which, at a certain level, can be visualized as a red-orange energy coiled at the base of the spine, hence the term serpent. It is one of the fundamental human structures, that component that reincarnates and through each life accumulates knowledge, developing as a spirit. Constantin Gheorghiță, *Info Reiki*, PSI, 2009, p. 15.

[248] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI,* p. 14: „The heavens were open as the Liturgy began, and I was amazed to see many things. God had prepared himself for the feast and had donned the vestments for such days. I, for one, prefer His white everyday vestments. Few people know, and even fewer see, that God is a person, that he has an actual throne and that he is always looking towards his creation." Mr Argeșanu then ascends in spirit to God's throne. Mr Argeșanu speaks to God, touches Him (which Moses or Elijah could not do!?), and is invited to sit at His right hand(!?).

[249] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI,* Dao, 2005, pp. 36, 40-41.

[250] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI,* Dao, 2005, p. 20.

[251] Idem, *Cele 7 peceți,* p. 97, p. 120.

that he was a disciple of a well-known spiritual father, with whose help he gained access to the light, and that, at various times in his life, his confessor priests were some other spiritual fathers.[252]. One of his book is dedicated to Jesus Christ and begins as follows: "Glory to Jesus Christ glory and gratitude to Mikao Usui for developing a system that allows anyone access to God, Heaven, Light, without passing through the filter of any institution, church, religion, dogma or belief"[253]. In other book, he claims that the Savior Christ Himself called him to be a fisher of men[254].

Like other Reiki adherents I have talked to, O.A claims that those he initiated into the practice of Reiki have become better, more tolerant, more sincere, more optimistic about the future, and others have even returned to Orthodoxy.[255] The assertions of O.A. are typical of New Age relativism: "The truth is not only Orthodox, but pertains to all knowledge, whether spiritual or scientific, whether it comes from Christianity, Judaism or the Orient"[256] or: „Neither the Liturgy nor the Eucharist are the whole truth, but are merely contained by it. They are parts of it"[257].

Admittedly, O.A advises his patients and disciples to attend the church, to be remembered in liturgies officiated at several monasteries (with the aim of obtaining forgiveness for personal karmic sins and those of the nation), to confess in order to cut the ties with evil, to give alms, to attend Holy Unction services for themselves and their families, to fast strictly and to pray, to go on pilgrimages to monasteries and holy places; to help people in distress, children, orphans, the sick, prisoners, the elderly; to baptize children in orphanages and, of course, to undertake Reiki initiations, radiesthesia optimizations, Chi Kung classes (which also redeem karmic

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[252] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI,* p. 9; Idem, *Cele 7 peceți,* p. 97.

[253] Idem, *Reiki. Între mit și realitate,* p. 5. Note the mix of Christianity (invocation of the Saviour), Reiki (mention of Mikao Usui) and the typical New Age idea that everyone can have a personal ontological connection with divinity.

[254] Idem, *Cele 7 peceți,* pp. 53-54: "At one point someone came to me. In the Spirit. This Someone, to whom I dedicate this book and at that moment I didn't know who he was or what he wanted, I heard him say to me: How about I make you a fisher of men?". Mr Argeșanu claims it was the Saviour, barefoot, plainly dressed.

[255] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI,* p. 27.

[256] Idem*, Reiki. Între mit și realitate,* p. 8; *Ibidem,* p. 18: „Orthodoxy, no matter how much it boasts, is far from perfect... No one owns the truth. Remember, not even Jesus knew when the world would end. Only the Father might know everything"; Idem, *Cele 7 peceți,* p. 81: „There are many paths that lead to God. Every religion, every law is a path, but they converge in one point: God. The Holy Trinity and implicitly Jesus Christ."

[257] Idem, *Cele 7 peceți,* p. 12

sins). All these are recommended to those who want to get well or to those who want to progress quickly on the path of Reiki[258].

Despite this insistence, however, followers are warned about the "dangers" they expose themselves to by going to Church and participating in the Mysteries of the Church. For example, in order to receive the Holy Communion (Eucharist) you must have a comparatively similar vibration, otherwise you destroy yourself as a person, which is why the Holy Communion should not be administered to the sick.[259] Priests also "bind you at the altar" when praying, reading the psalter, receiving confession, or during the Holy Liturgy when they take the light of the Holy Spirit and make it into a cord with which they astrally bind people's hands. To be released from this "bond" you either need light of higher vibration or use the Cho Ku Rei symbol in reverse to force the light out of those bonds[260].

In general, the books authored by this reiki master are full of affirmations incompatible with the Christian theachings: he asserted the idea of evolution and imperfection of God, Darwinism in the creation of the universe, polytheism and other ideas related to paganism[261]; also, that angels have the ability to procreate, and saints have come to us through successive incarnations. We also find typical New Age statements about Jesus Christ such as the Virgin Mary was the first to teach esoteric notions or the teaching Jesus passed on to the apostles has been lost over time.

Although he states that he fears neither God, nor demons, nor humans, he evinces a real obsession with the work of negative entities, as he

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[258] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI,* p.56: „All the Orthodox Holy Mysteries (sacraments) enhance Reiki practitioners' ability to perform therapy and help people, animals, plants and themselves. Those who are practising Orthodox are rapidly advancing along the Reiki path. And the Eucharist quickly enhances their inner light and facilitates access to the Universal Source of Light."

[259] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI,* p. 15: „From this point of view, administering th Eucharist to a sick person is like pouring spiritual fire down their throat!"

[260] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI,* p. 103.

[261] Idem, *Cele 7 peceți,* p. 24: „I believe that there is evolution even within the Godhead and that God himself changes"; *Reiki. Între mit și realitate,* p. 8; *Ibidem,* p. 18: „I honestly believe that divinity also evolves and implicitly God is at some point in the situation of knowing everything, but not being aware at all times of His own qualities and flaws". *Ibidem:* p. 29: „The story of creation in 7 days is just a story. Perhaps this is what Moses saw in the Spirit and it took him days to see in atemporality how the billions of years of the Universe unfolded. Unfortunately for the Church, Darwin's theory is true"; *Ibidem*, p. 41, 47: Our planet has its god, who is called Theros, who is aggressive and sexual, compared to Mother Geia who is harmonious and too kind sometimes; „The God of our planet is not the only one in the universe. There are other gods of other planets, of other solar systems, who follow their own faith and will. The gods who appeared at the genesis of the Universe filled the primordial darkness, forming new constellations, new planets, new universes."

calls them, hence the need for spiritual protection[262]. In his books he describes the levels at which a psychotronic (PSI) attack can be launched against a person: the seven astral fields, the chakras, the acupuncture points and meridians, the vital energy organs, the soul, the kundalini serpent, the angel of the respective person, light, darkness, and also self-awareness, pereption, love, will, thought, love, health etc. Protective systems range from psalms, crosses, icons, candles, to Buddhist meditation bell, or even sex. Reiki, he argues, is one of the safest means of protection because, being designed to work with symbols, it is not influenced by a person's current state of mind and allows practitioners to heal themselves as they apply the treatment.The outpouring of hatred in his writings is a bizarre aspect of his reiki system that sets it apart from other Reiki systems promoted in the West and in Romania. This reiki master claims to have the power to send demons to people and attack souls. He also allegedly sends negatively programmed spaces, grid-informed light, quicksilver, spirits of earth, water, fire, and air, archangels with fiery swords attacking computers, and so on[263].

In conclusion, it can be said that in O.A writing, Reiki and Orthodoxy are blended, in the all-encompassing crucible of New Age esotericism. The ideas he promotes in his books and on TV shows are a symptom of the religious relativism that has swept Romania. They find admirers even among practicant Christians who do not consider that they should relate their faith to the Church or to dogmas and who have a negative view of the Church as an institution, of priests and of the hierarchy. Books of this kind also find admirers among practising Christians who, while engaged in Church services, keep their faith rooted in superstition and magical thinking.

Another mix of Reiki, Orthodoxy and radiesthesia can be found in C.G's *InfoReiki*. The ideas in this book are no less challenging for Orthodox Christians, although they lack the vindictiveness found in Ovidiu Dragoș Argeșanu. *InfoReiki* develops an intricate system of spiritual protection against evil entities, handling, for example, the *sword of light* (energy concentrated in different forms, with the purpose of being used as a weapon) or with *energy spheres and fields* (they belong to the category of consciously created thought forms, charged with high vibrational energy, to which different programs are implemented depending on the purpose for which they are created). C.G. claims that the InfoReiki sphere is a sphere of higher vibrational energy, corresponding to the energy level of the seventh

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[262] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI,* p. 65: „Now I know how the laws of the universe work and I no longer fear God. In fact, I no longer fear God, demons, or humans. Simply because he never punishes and nothing can happen without his knowledge and permission."

[263] Idem, *Arta războiului PSI,* pp. 13, 23, 25 („suffices it to focus on his weakest part and burn it")

chakra, having the color purple. *It is a sphere whose source is the Mother of God, from whom it is received as a gift for the recognition and spiritual development of InfoReiki practitioners*. The InfoReiki sphere is invoked in the following way: with the palms upturned, utter the words "I invoke the InfoReiki sphere of the Mother of God in my palms for the purpose... "After use, thank the Mother of God for the help received[264].

Also, to drive away the evil spirits the following formula is used, which is, in fact, an adapted formula of the prayers of the Church: "With the Light of the Holy Spirit *flowing through my palms*, loosen all the bonds placed on unclean spirits and all that is done to keep them bound to (the person's name) and let them depart from this creature now and forever and go where the Good Lord decides. Amen"[265]. Soul purification is a particular case of energy cleansing and consists in determining the energy charge of a person's soul. There are actions which by their nature engender evil energies affecting the soul: anger, unforgiveness, negative thoughts, hatred, fights, jealousy, rage, gossip.

To remove negative energies and entities the practitioners recite the following algorithm (set of affirmations): "With the light of the Holy Spirit flowing through my palms remove from the fields, chakras, soul and structures of this person all negative energies and entities now and forever and let them all go where the Good Lord decides"[266]. A therapy for the restoration of the soul requires the following ritual: "With the palms in front of the heart, turned to Heaven, the following algorithm/prayer is uttered: «Please, Lord, send into my palms the clean, clear, shining soul that You have prepared for (the person's name) to restore his/her soul, to be able to carry out the mission that You, Lord, have given him/her. Amen». Wait a few seconds until the energy received is felt in the palms of the hands, then *implement it in the person's soul*. Finally, breathe crosswise three times on the person's soul"[267]. As I have shown, in order to be more attractive in the Romanian context, some masters combine Reiki with Orthodoxy. They compare, for example, Reiki attunements with the grace received at ordination by a priest[268] or claim that Reiki therapy can heal more than the Savior did[269].

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264 Constantin Gheorghiță, *InfoReiki,* Dao Psi, 2009, p. 121.
265 Constantin Gheorghiță, *InfoReiki,* Dao Psi, 2009, p. 128.
266 Constantin Gheorghiță, *Info Reiki*, PSI, 2009, p. 61.
267 Constantin Gheorghiță, *Info Reiki*, PSI, 2009, p. 88.
268 When asked if there is any connection between Reiki attunements and the Divine Grace, he answered is: "There is! Reiki attunements are done by divine grace. A Reiki attunement can be compared to the ordination of priests. All ordained ones can work as priests, but not all of them have the grace. The same is true in Reiki. All those initiated can transmit energy, they can heal, but some also possess the grace" (Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki modern,* Teora, 2002, p. 28)
269 Ovidiu Dragoș Argeșanu, *Reiki, între mit și realitate*, p. 65.

In the Reiki systems I have described, the evil in one's life is explained exclusively by the energy attacks that have been directed against a person (charms, psychological attacks) or by the karmic laws to which one is subject. The fault is therefore no longer in man, in man's sins, in man's estrangement from God, but outside man, in something alien to his person. Only the "initiated" are able to identify the nature of the evil attacking a person and apply the appropriate "treatment"; consequently, the church is useless, or, at best, it is secondary to these "healers," a mere repository of energies to be used. Moreover, all those who popularize these practices in Romania try to detach them from their religious context. They try to present them at first as self-healing and healing techniques, and then, to those who engage in their practice, they are presented as procedures whose purpose is the healing of the soul, the acquisition of paranormal abilities, and then spiritual liberation. It is only after a few years of practice that the strong religious and occult underpinnings of these movements or currents become apparent.

The orthodox teaching shows that our estrangement from the source of life, which is God, leads to the impoverishment of our own lives, which goes from the death of the soul to sickness and sometimes even death of the body. Mechanical means cannot treat the passions of the soul and the diseases of the body, which are disorders of the natural state of health. Instead, man must consciously participate in the healing of his whole being and cooperate with divine grace. Healing comes from God, as the Psalmist David says: „Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies" (Ps. 102/103, 3-4). Restoring health to the soul and ultimately to the body (if this contributes to the person's salvation) means restoring the loving bond with God, who cleanses the causes of sickness (sins), heals the effects (wounds), and then restores by grace the fallen human nature[270]. Divine grace is not obtained magically or mechanically, by some spiritual recipe or automatic technique, but is received through prayer and participation in the Holy Mysteries of the Church, through the knowledge and authentic living of the Orthodox faith, as the Holy Apostle James says: „Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him" (James V, 14-15).

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[270] „Come, let us return to the Lord. For He has torn us to pieces, but He will heal us; He has wounded us, but He will bind up our wounds" (Hosea 6, 1); „My son, when you are ill, do not delay, but pray to God, for it is he who heals. Flee wickedness and purify your hands; cleanse your heart of every sin" (Sirach, 38, 9-10).

4. Conclusion.

Reiki, as a healing therapy was born in the Far-Orient, in a certain socio-cultural context, and its transfer to the West was made with the loss of its exact original meaning. It is based on teachings from several Eastern religions, to which are added esoteric teachings and distorted Christian practices. The nature and source of the Reiki energy, which most masters claim is impersonal, is one of the most sensitive issues in this context. Hristenco even compares this energy to electricity, which we can use at will. He also says elsewhere: "This energy comes from the universal energy source which cannot be physically located and which is not God, but can be considered a creation of God. When God created the world, he also created this source of energy to allow it to exist and operate[271]

Admittedly, healing is a very important topics for contemporary men, and some people are enthusiastic about Reiki results. In general, many of our fellow people readily accept miraculous solutions for improving their lives and health, use them without questioning their potential spiritual effects, and believe they can still pretend to be good Christians. All forms of complementary medicine practiced in Romania today, including Reiki, profess teachings contrary to Christian creed such as pantheism, reincarnation, astral predestination, impersonalization of divine grace and even of God, and, last but not least, anthropocentrism—the idea that the power of healing resides in everyone and can ne activated by connecting one's inner energy with the universal, cosmic energy[272]. Reiki proposes healing the body by ourselves, by accessing an energy that can be used at any time, by uniting ourselves with that energy[273].

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[271] Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki tradițional. De la gradul I la maestru*, Teora 2008, p. 24; „Energy exists in everything, what differs is its frequency, its vibration and the information it carries. The source of energy is one, be it called the Holy Spirit, the universal source of energy, or the primordial Merkaba". Constantin Gheorghiță, *Info Reiki*, PSI, 2009, p. 9.

[272] Dumitru Hristenco states that the "meditation of the masters" consists, among other things, in imagining all that is good as a white light flowing towards the heart. This light represents the supreme force, God. One has to immerse oneself in that light and meditate that way: "You belong to the light...You are a pure spirit, a beloved child of God, outside time, outside space...You are pure light, pure love, pure compassion.... You are one with the Universe"…(Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki tradițional. De la gradul I la maestru*, Teora 2008, pp. 154-155) „The Reiki path is a path of development, of spiritual progress. It is not at all wrong to consider Reiki as a path to enlightenment" (Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki tradițional. De la gradul I la maestru*, Teora 2008, p. 149).

[273] Wouter Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought,* Leiden, 1996, pp. 54-55.

THE HUMAN POTENTIAL MOVEMENT

The *Human Potential Movement – HPM* emerged in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, within the new New Age paradigm of "personal development". HPM was so influential that it ranked third among the schools of thought in psychology, after psychoanalysis and behaviorism. It introduced a new idea in psychology: namely, that man has incredible potential and that he must become aware of the hidden, latent forces within himself. In contrast, classical psychology regarded human nature as inherently clouded by sex, death and instincts resulting from social conditioning and environment. HPM aimed to study the bright side of the human personality and not the dark side, to show that people have all kinds of potentialities and possibilities so that they can become authentic, fully functioning at their best.

In the decades that followed, Human Potential Movement lost its importance in psychology, but remained influential in society through a series of seminars and personal development courses, such as Neurolinguistic Programming, Landmark Education (Forum) or the Silva Method[274]. It is estimated that large U.S. corporations spend about $4 billion a year on such seminars[275]. For some years now, imitating the Western model, large companies and corporations in Romania have been sending their employees to such training courses and seminars, some of them compulsory. The managers' intention is to boost their employees' productivity, stimulate their creativity and improve their communication skills, all of which will, of course, result in higher performance, to the company's profit[276].

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[274] On HPM, see Michael York, *The Emerging Network. Sociology of the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements,* Rowman&Littelfield Publishers, 1995, pp. 12-14; *In Gods we trust. New Patterns of Religious Pluralism in America,* ed. Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, Transaction Publishers, 1990 (sixth edition, 2009), pp. 223-224; Michael Hall, *Could NLP Re-vitalize the Human potential Movement? If so, how?;* www.self-actualizing.org /articles/revitalize.pdf.: Idem, *Was NLP really the child of the Human Potential Movement?;* Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement. The Celebration of Self and the Sacralization of Modernity,* Oxford, 1999, pp. 51-54.

[275] Glenn Rupert, *Employing the New Age. Training Seminars,* in *Perspective son the New Age,* Edited by James R. Lewis and Gordon Melton, State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 128.

[276] P. Heelas, *The New Age Movement. The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity,* Oxford, 1999, p. 168.

Including topics focusing on the development of human potential in a missiological approach may also seem surprising. Landmark Forum or Neuro-Linguistic Programming are programs that claim to equip their clients with psychological or cognitive strengths, as well as techniques for improving communication and improving relationships with others. It is true that these courses and programs do not claim to be religious and operate according to all the rules of the market economy: their activity consists of providing (for a fee), courses, internships or seminars, whether or not accompanied by the sale of books or technical support[277]. A rather wide range of courses of this kind have recently invaded the Romanian market. As I will show below, these courses operate in an insidious way, by subtle manipulation, deconstructing one's personality, values and beliefs and putting in their place the "new man" for whom everything is about material, profit, success, efficiency[278].

1. Landmark education (Forum).

One of the most influential HPM seminars in the 1970s was the Erhard Seminars Training (EST), a two-week crash course aimed at helping participants achieve a radical personal transformation in a short time. Within a few years, the course had spread across America and then Europe and the world. Werner Erhard (born John Paul Rosenberg in 1935), who had launched this course, was a practitioner of Zen philosophy and Scientology. EST advocated the idea that God is within, in the human heart, that we need not be concerned with the existence of God but with the experience of God – which is the true religion. In the 1980s, EST was continued by other influential programs, the most important of which was Landmark Education[279].

In the studies on the New Religious Movements, mentions of Landmark Education are quite rare, and occur mainly in the French-speaking milieu. In fact, France is the only country where Landmark Education was described in the 1995 report of the Parliamentary Commission of inquiry as a "sect that emotionally destabilises its members". The society promoting Landmark Education was dissolved after

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277 Anne Fournier, Catherine Picard, *Secte, democrație, mondializare,* Gramar, Bucharest, 2006, p. 19.

278 Margaret Singer Thaler, *Cults in our Midst. The Hidden Menace in Our Everyday Lives*, 1995, pp. 182-184.

279 Charlotte Faltermayer, *The Best of Est?,* "Time Magazine", 16 March 1998 http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,987975,00.html. See also the biography of Steven Pressman, *Outrageous Betrayal: The Dark Journey of Werner Erhard, from Est to Exile,* New York, St. Martin's Press, 1993.

a journalistic investigation carried out by France 3 television, entitled *Voyage au pays des nouveaux gourous (Journey to the land of the new gurus*), revealed several of its sectarian characteristics.

A description of the training offered by Landmark can be found in Thomas Lardeur's work, *Les sectes dans l'entreprise*: "Landmark mainly proposes a pathway called life curriculum". The first stage is called Forum. It is a four-day training course, which takes place in a large room where 50 to 250 people gather. The layout is invariably the same. The facilitator presents an idea to the audience and then asks for the participants' opinions....From this starting point, each participant is invited to speak and tell their life story to an eager audience".

In particular, I was struck by the written pledge that learners must sign at the beginning of the stage: "I agree that Landmark Education is solely responsible for the methodical presentation of the Forum and that I am responsible for my own participation in the Forum, as well as for *my mental and psychological health...* I voluntarily and knowingly assume and take upon myself, as well as on behalf of my heirs, my family members, and executors of my will, all risks of physical injury or emotional distress which may occur during or after the Forum and hereby agree to exonerate Landmark Education and its representatives from any and all liabilities which may arise as a result of my participation in the Forum"[280].

About the physical or emotional harm involved, we learn from the "Important Information" section, chapter 6: "Occasionally, during or shortly after participation in the program a very small number of individuals who have no (personal or family) history of mental illness or medication/drug abuse have reported temporary episodes of disturbances ranging from hyperactivity, irregular or poor quality sleep, to mildly psychotic behavior. An even smaller number of people have reported more severe symptoms, ranging from mildly psychotic behaviour to psychosis requiring occasional medical treatment and hospitalisation. For less than 1/1000 of 1% of participants, inexplicable suicides or destructive behaviour were reported"[281].

Classes are generally held from Friday to Sunday, from 9 am to 10 pm each day. Rules are set at the beginning of the program, and participants

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[280] Thomas Lardeur, *Les sectes. Savoir les reconaitre, comprendre leurs mechanismes, les combattre efficacement, aider les victimes,* Presses de la Renaisances, Paris, 2004, pp. 54-56 ("Landmark Education: responsable mais pas coupable....", p. 55).

[281] Laura Toma, *Landmark: 4.000 de romani au plătit ca sa plângă in grup,* article published in „România Liberă", 9 December 2009. http://www.romanialibera.ro/a172073/landmark-4-000-de-romani-au-platit-ca-să-planga-in-grup.html (accessed on 24 May 2024)

are advised not to miss any part of the program and to actively participate rather than just observe. The course is interactive, and runs as a conversation, in which the trainer presents some ideas and participants voluntarily engage in the discussion by sharing with others how these ideas apply to their own lives. The ideas presented may include the following: there is a great difference between what happens in one's life and the interpretation that person gives to events; people create their own meaning in life - nothing is inherent in the world; people have preconceived notions about what makes them right and others wrong (rackets - unproductive ways of being or acting that include complaints that some things shouldn't be the way they are); people can "transform" themselves by adopting a new way of being instead of changing their relation to the past. Participants are encouraged to call people they are angry with and either forgive that person or apologise for their mistakes.

The Landmark Forum is a controversial group in America as well as France. Landmark Forum helped bring down the Cult Awarness Network, as it was among the groups that sued it in 1994. In 1996, LF also sued Margaret Singer over claims in her book *Cults in our Midsts*, and as a result in the second edition of the book, LF is no longer mentioned by name. The Rick Rose Institute was also sued by LF for defamatory statements, but the complaint was later withdrawn.

Landmark Forum, like EST, claims to offer only an "epistemological alternative" that does not contradict what one believes. Furthermore, it shows that the "experience of self" encourages one to help and serve other fellow people. The Forum includes philanthropic foundations that donate to hospitals and paediatric centres. A Landmark Education alumna, Ginna Goodenow, founded *Kicking for Kids Who Can't* (http://kickingforkidswhocant.org/), a foundation that aids amputee children by purchasing prosthetics and other items to help them walk again. Vanto Group, Inc. founded in 1993 as „Landmark Education Business Development" (LEBD), a subsidiary of Landmark Education Enterprises, Inc. uses Landmark Education techniques to provide consulting services to a variety of companies (http://www.vantogroup.com/). Interestingly, its globally recognized corporate and business clients include the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The connection between Landmark and Scientology is striking and this is seen not only in the person of the founder, Erhard, a former

Scientologist and admirer of Hubbard[282]. By the time Erhard established EST as a combination of Zen, psychosynthesis and business management in 1971, he had been expelled from Scientology. Although Landmark rejects accusations that it is a cult, and Scientology struggles to show that it is a religion, there are still some common elements. Both are "technologies" and rely on the enthusiasm of those who find in them new ways of approaching life. Secondly, there is the prohibitive cost of the course, comparable to what is paid for auditing sessions. Thirdly, it is a course that is undoubtedly based on the „clearing" method, as the techniques it uses are very close to Scientology techniques. Like Scientology, Landmark uses the "bullbaiting" technique, an exercise in which the learner must remain motionless, unresponsive, while the trainer or instructor insults, harasses or even physically touches him/her.

Both claim to teach one to identify hurtful events in the past, to clear out that „place" until it becomes empty space, because ultimately, where there is nothing, one can build and put anything in place. A fundamental tenet of the Forum is that what happens in life and the significance of what happens are two completely different things. Everyone creates their own meaning of events. This is all very similar to Hubbard's view of how the mind works and how to improve it. Landmark, like Scientology for that matter, are very careful in their usage of language. Both teach people how to be aware of the language they use. Changing the language, that is the terms employed, also changes the people's perception of experiencing reality. The most visible alteration of language is the redefinition of a word so that it is understood only by the group members. The stake of these courses lies, in our opinion, in depersonalization of their followers.

In Romania, Landmark Education courses were promoted, until recently, by *Fundația pentru Autocunoaștere și Dezvoltare Personală* (the *Foundation for Self-Discovery and Personal Development*), an NGO created in 2000 and headed by Connie Larkin[283]. At the time I was conducting my research, the Foundation's official website, http://www.fadp.ro/desprenoi.html, was still active. By accessing it I was able to learn that Romania is the only country of the former communist bloc that has started implementing the Landmark Education program, with advanced courses and seminars, thematic courses, communication and

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[282] Erhard had described Hubbard as "the greatest philosopher of the 20th century" (Bent Corydon, *L. Hubbard: Messiah or Madman,* New Jersey, 1996, p. 15).

[283] See the interview with Connie Larkin, who supervised the implementation of Landmark courses in Romania, http://www.landmarkeducationnews.info/2008/05/13/landmark-education-in-romania-part-1/ (accessed on 25 May 2024)

leadership classes[284]. Forum participants were encouraged to recruit other people: “Landmark Forum on 14,15,16 and 18 August. So far, 53 persons have enrolled. The course fee is 980 lei and the registration fee 300 lei. Sign up at least one person in your life for the Landmark Forum!”[285]

I investigated the extent to which the Romanian press is interested in this topic. All I could find was a single article in “România Liberă” newspaper, signed by Laura Toma, and entitled *Landmark. 4000 de români au plătit ca să plângă în grup (Landmark. 4,000 Romanians paying a fee to cry together*), which presents both praises and criticism of the Forum. I learned that the Forum suddenly ceased its activity in September 2009, having been attended by about 4,000 Romanians[286]. Regardless of the current situation of the Foundation, a thorough investigation of the Landmark Forum, based on these observations, is indispensable, on the one hand because of the large number of people who attended, and on the other because it can always be “resurrected”, possibly under a different name, given that several companies and firms purchased Landmark courses for their employees.

The forum is successful with people who are slightly confused, insecure, unfulfilled, unclear on the path to follow in life, with some emotional trauma - even if it is not necessarily visible. These people see nothing wrong with turning to certain techniques intended to help them thrive. The question is whether these people are really being helped by these techniques or whether they just believe that life changes for the better,

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[284] Here are the courses available on the website (http://www.fadp.ro/desprenoi.html): Landmark Forum - 980 lei full cost, duration: three days and one evening; Landmark Forum în Acţiune/ Landmark Forum in Action, a 10-session seminar series included in the cost of the Landmark Forum; Cursul Avansat Landmark/ The Advanced Landmark Course – 1,380 lei full cost, duration: three days and one evening; Programul de Expresie de Sine şi Leadership/ Self-Expression and Leadership Program 1,200 lei full cost, duration: 3 days (Saturdays) and 12 sessions. Curriculum pentru Comunicare: C.A.P. Comunicare, Acces la Putere/ Curriculum for Communication: C.A.P. Communication, Access to Power: 780 lei full cost, two days and one evening; C.P.C. Comunicare, Puterea de a Crea/ C.P.C. Communication, Power to Create: 1,080 lei full cost, duration: two days and one evening; T.M.L.P. Team Management and Leadership Program 1,800 lei full cost, duration: one year classes, attendance in Bucharest and 4 weekends abroad; Landmark Leadership Program, 500 lei per weekend (4 weekends) and 16 sessions; Seminars for graduates, with different topics (relationships, money, sex and intimacy, living life with passion, more than fitness, commitment, efficiency, etc.), cost 500 lei; duration 10 sessions over three and a half months. A simple calculation shows that if someone had attended the Forum and continued with advanced studies, they would have paid around 8000 RON!

[285] http://fadpblog.wordpress.com/ (accessed on 24 May 2024)

[286] Laura Toma, *art.cit,* http://www.romanialibera.ro/a172073/landmark-4-000-de-romani-au-platit-ca-să-planga-in-grup.html (accessed on 24 May 2024)

whether it is a delusion. Sometimes, with persons who have paid a large amount of money for a disappointing course that has not lived up to expectations, the so-called "Festinger syndrome" known to the sociology of religions kicks in: they cannot accept that they have paid for nothing and end up self-convincing of the usefulness of the course.

2. Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP).

The term *Neuro Linguistic Programming* (NLP) was coined by John Grinder (b. 1940) and Richard Bandler (b. 1950) in 1970s America, and originally referred to a form of psychological therapy designed to address problems such as phobia, depression, psychosomatic illnesses[287]. Later, NLP was promoted as a "science of excellence", based on observing how successful people achieved results. Due to insufficient empirical evidence to prove its alleged effectiveness, NLP has been ignored by both applied psychology (psychotherapy and counselling) and academic psychology.

Grinder and Bandler studied the success patterns of several therapists including Fritz Pearls, a psychotherapist and inventor of Gestalt therapy, Virginia Satir, a specialist in family therapy, and Milton Erickson, a well-known hypnotherapist. Grinder and Bandler then set out to make these and other success patterns accessible to help people improve their lives. Bendler, for example, had gone so far as to dress like Milton Erickson, and even bought the same type of pipe and imitated the way Erickson smoked[288].

NLP practitioners regard John Grinder and Richard Bandler as genius experts, pointing out that the former was a professor of linguistics at the University of Santa Cruz and the latter a computer scientist interested in psychology[289]. The truth is that the two are not recognized as experts in their respective fields. Moreover, in 1996 Bandler took Grinder to court, seeking to obtain exclusive intellectual property rights over the NLP brand. As the business had expanded internationally, the amounts charged for such trainings (courses) were huge, in the order of millions of dollars, hence the interest in obtaining exclusivity. It should also be mentioned that in 1986 Bandler was accused of the death of NLP practitioner, Corine Christensen,

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[287] Data available at http://www.nlpexplorer.eu/. See also, David Molden, Pat Hutchinson, *NLP Genial*, Amsta Publishing, 2008, p. 12; Christian Iordănescu, *NLP și magia comunicării,* pp. 27-29.

[288] Christian Iordănescu, *NLP și magia comunicării,* p. 202.

[289] Anthony Robbins, *Putere nemărginită,* Amaltea, 2002, p. 34. On Grinder's website, http://www.johngrinder.com/bio%27s.htm , he claims to be "the greatest thinker of our time," whose wisdom is reflected in his books and in the more than 1,000 seminars a year that propagate his ideas.

but the case was eventually dismissed, even though the gun that had been fired belonged to her.

Neuro refers to the way the brain and nervous system work; *linguistic* – the way we communicate with others; *programming* – the systematic way we encode our skills and knowledge and manage to replicate the experiences and skills of others in order to achieve our own goals.

More precisely, the term *neuro* refers to the fact that all the information we possess, is received and processed through the nervous system. Three categories of people have been identified, according to the type of sensory modalities they predominantly use in acquiring information: "visual" - those who internally picture the information in the form of images; "aural" - those who pay attention to sound, including their inner voice; "kinesthetic" (sentients) - those who "feel" things by use of experience or practice. It is quite rare to meet people whose olfactory or gustatory registers predominate.

The term "linguistic" refers to the fact that *language is the medium of communication, both with others and with ourselves*; depending on previous experiences, for each individual, the same word may arouse different feelings or reactions (for example, on hearing the word "success" one becomes cheerful, because they have just had such success, while another will feel depressed, having had repeated failures in the past). Language is considered to have two levels, or structures: *surface* – the discursive language through which we address others; *deep* – the unspoken inner language, a complex synthesis of all our experiences, which cannot be expressed as such. In the process of communication, there is a shift from deep to surface language structure, a shift that brings with it the loss or omission of information due to selection and simplification, and thus a distortion of meaning. NLP practitioners claim to be able to decipher part of the "map" or grid by which the others structure their reality.

According to NLP theory, communication has three levels: the logical level (the actual words), the paraverbal level (tone of voice) and the non-verbal level (gestures). The first accounts for only 7% of the communication, while gestures account for 55%. NLP teaches that everyone needs to keep in mind the sensory channel of the conversation partner (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory and gustatory) and communicate through the same channel, otherwise communication is blocked. NLP also teaches how to "manage" language: volume, intonation, speed, rhythm, timbre, pauses in speech, in order to elicit the desired result from the interlocutor.

The term "programming" highlights the fact that *thought stereotypes* (those that have penetrated deep into the subconscious, operating as

unshakeable beliefs) determine our reaction in a given context, the states of mind we experience and consequently the type of *behaviour* we will adopt. The culture to which we belong, the *education* we receive at home and at school, structure most of the programs on the basis of which we function and predispose us to certain behaviours that determine our personal and social life. The founders of NLP discovered that ineffective programs can be altered by acting on the representational systems (visual, auditory and kinesthetic) and using specific linguistic techniques.

In conclusion, NLP is concerned with identifying and modifying the structures ("programs") that arise from the complex interaction between the brain/nervous system ("neuro"), language ("linguistic") and the environment[290]. NLP claims to be a *methodology*, based on the observation that any behaviour has an *underlying structure* that can be learned, modelled, modified (re-programd) and taught (explained to others). NLP also claims to be a *technology* that facilitates the organisation of the information one possesses so that one can achieve the desired positive results that one previously was unalble to achieve.

For example, a smoker who wants to quit smoking needs to identify the trigger that made him light up the first cigarette. In NLP language, that stimulus that triggers a specific physiological or emotional state or behaviour, and which can be represented by image, sound, taste or smell, is called an *anchor*. In the case of the smoker, the anchor may be an image of a famous actor smoking – hence the respective person's belief that all successful people smoke. NLP claims to help this person understand that there are successful people who do not smoke, and in general to provide "anchoring techniques", i.e. ways to identify and change the state produced by the anchor.

"Anchoring" can also be related to the future, i.e. a state we create in relation to the future can change a present state. For example, NLP teaches that we should think of future goals as if we have already achieved them. We need to "practice" making a phone call, going to a meeting, having an unpleasant conversation, buying a house or a new car by assuming that the event has already occurred successfully, in other words we need to "train" ourselves for success.

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[290] Anthony Robbins, *Putere nemărginită,* p. 32, states that LP is the study of how language, both verbal and non-verbal, affects our nervous system. Our ability to do anything in life is based on our ability to manage our own nervous system. In brief, NLP is the science that teaches us how to direct our brain in an optimal way to obtain the results we want.

NLP argues that when one constructs one's own interpretation of an event, the respective person puts that event through a filtering process which is nothing but the way we omit, distort or generalize information coming through sensory channels. Filtering is done with meta-programs (filters that operate unconsciously), values (those that decide how we feel about how we carry out our actions), beliefs (one of the most important elements of NLP modelling is to uncover a person's beliefs to be modelled), attitudes, decisions or memories (as we get older, our reactions are controlled by our collection of past memories and the present plays a secondary role in our lives). These filters decide which information is retained when we create an internal representation of an event.

What NLP promises is to control the filters so that people can improve their lives. One of the stated goals of NLP is to modify a person's beliefs and values: according to this view, "we can modify values and beliefs to adapt them to changes and at the same time to our personal goals in the present or the future; *once our values and beliefs become unhelpful, others must take their place, stronger more practical ones that give us the courage we need to achieve our personal goals*"[291].

In recent years, NLP has gained ground in Romania. The first NLP course was organized in 2001 by Andy Szekely, according to his own declarations[292]. The course, which received intense media coverage, brought together 90 participants (psychologists, business people, athletes, teachers, doctors, engineers, students). The first part of the program was completed in June 2002 with 40 NLP practitioners. Andy Szekely is the founder of Asociația Română de Comunicare și Analiză Tranzacțională (the Romanian Association for Communication and Transactional Analysis, http://www.alphaleaders.ro/), through which he offers training, coaching and consultancy services for organisations and entrepreneurs. Through *AS traning&consulting*, he promotes individual and professional performance at the highest level of excellence, the company being the organizer of the first NLP training program for the public in Romania, in partnership with UK-based NLP specialists.

Since then, a number of books have been published in Romanian language, specialized trainers have appeared, and in HR departments of companies NLP is considered to be one of the top development and training strategies. NLP ideas are promoted in publications such as: „Tribuna economică", „Revista de idei în afaceri", "Psihologia" journal.

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[291] Christian Iordănescu, *NLP și magia comunicării,* pp. 61-62.
[292] Andy Szekely, *NLP-calea succesului*, Amaltea, 2003, p. 19; http://www.andyszekely.ro/

Christian Iordăchescu, another NLP specialist, left Romania in 1978 to settle in Stuttgart. After graduating from a civil engineering technical school, he joined a US military base. He was highly appreciated by the American military authorities and soon became president of the German-American Friendship Club. Later, at AAFES (Army and Air Force Exchange Services), he undertook to complete his studies, including a degree in Fundamental Economics in Stuttgart and New York. Between 1999 and 2004, he specialized in Neurolinguistic Programming, obtaining international certification as an NLP Practitioner (Society of Neurolinguistic Programming) and local certification as an NLP Master Practitioner in Stuttgart. Currently, Christian Iordănescu is a member of the Romanian Association of Neurolinguistic Programming, writes papers on NLP, organizes personal development programs on these methods, collaborates with various organizations and publications in Romania.

C. Iordăchescu has a close collaboration with the magazine "Capital", with „Resurse umane"("Human Resources") Foundation in Romania, with which he organized a series of seminars on "The Art and Technique of Communication, Motivational Education, Choaching and Stress and Time Management". The preface of his book *NLP și magia comunicării* (*NLP and the magic of communication*) is authored by an editor-in-chief of the magazine "Capital", who wrote on this occasion: "The study and practice of NLP has developed my mechanisms of human thinking and relating, patterns of behaviour with enormous potential for enhancing one's own worth and interpersonal relationships"[293].

A mere internet search reveals a number of NLP courses and seminars. For example, between 26 September and 4 November and between 28 November and 6 December 2009, two NLP sessions were held in Bucharest, entitled *NLP Practitioner Intensive*. From the advertisement, we learn that this course helps us to easily reach our goals, to make changes and integrate them into a new perspective of success, to communicate more effectively with those around us.

Those who attend the NLP Intensive course are promised to gain new insights into complicated blockage situations and discover new ways to resolve them; clarify their strengths and areas they need to develop; communicate better and be able to decipher the messages of others; discover new aspects of relationships and manage them better; clarify their priorities and align their behaviours, beliefs, goals, in a congruent way; develop new skills instead of unwanted habits; communicate better with their body, increase their performance and live more harmoniously. We further learn

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[293] Christian Iordănescu, *NLP și magia comunicării,* p. 11

that by attending this course, you clarify what is really important to you and discover the tools with which to achieve it.

The investment was substantial, 855 Euro + VAT, 1055 Euro if paid in two instalments, or 1205 Euro in three instalments. In return, quick results are promised for all social-professional categories: teachers who want to use modern and creative teaching methods; psychologists/psychotherapists who want to employ a set of therapeutic techniques; physicians who want their patients to trust them more; salespersons who want to improve their skills and boost their sales; managers who want to be as efficient as possible in handling all situations; priests who want to inspire people to follow God's path; artists or athletes who want to have as many achievements as possible; parents who want a healthy bond with their children; partners who want a flourishing couple relationship; finally, for curious persons interested in their own personal and professional development, this is the right method!

3. Controversial issues.

The great "discovery" of NLP is that we use language to communicate, and our brains and bodies to make ourselves understood. For specialists, this is extreme intellectual simplicity (even "intellectual fraud" as some experts in the field have put it), but this is what makes it accessible and ensures its success[294]. NLP proposes certain paradigms that are not scientifically verified. For example, it states that there are six eye movements, which constitute a kind of "reading lens" for "deciphering" the speaker. For example, if we have a right-handed "visual" in front of us and we ask him if he watched TV yesterday, he must necessarily look up and to the right when he thinks, otherwise the answer is considered to be a lie.

The same can be said about questionnaires to identify the sensory type. To a question such as "When you enter a church, what strikes you is: a) the smell of incense; b) the semiobscurity (candlelight, stained glass); c) the silence; d) nothing, all churches are alike", the same person's answer may vary from day to day, depending on their state of mind, or one may indicate 2-3 answers simultaneously. Specialists have emphasised the lack of empirical research in NLP, the fact that easily generalises isolated cases[295].

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[294] Christian Balicco, *La programmation neurolnguistique ou l'art de menipuler ses semblables*, in „Science et pseudo-sciences", no. 243, pp. 10-28; Christian Balicco holds a PhD in Psychology, is a human resources consultant and a member of the American Psychological Association.

[295] Margaret Singer, *Crazy Therapies. What are they? Do they work?,* Jossey Bass, 1996.

NLP has a manipulative side that is acknowledged even by its followers: „NLP is accused of being too manipulative. In the beginning, it was used in a very limited way, in „sales courses" for managers or in radio and television commercials. So where other people could be influenced against their will. After a strong movement in circles of leading psychologists and therapists, NLP went through a process of revival, improvement and development."[296]

We do not know what the "revival" and "improvement" was, since the "anchoring technique" is still used successfully by marketing and advertising professionals. For example, one trick of real estate agents is to prepare the house they are about to sell as if it were a cradle of family happiness. Even if the weather is warm, they light a fire in the fireplace, roast coffee or toast bread just when the client is due to arrive. This mix works, because people don't just buy things, they also buy the moods and feelings they generate.

Also, the most effective TV commercials are those that use the NLP technique of connecting the product to a particular emotional state. Commercials say next to nothing about the product, except its name. What they do is associate the product with a desired state: joy, excitement, freedom, power, success, sensuality. Buy the product – the ad seems to say – and you will obtain that state too!

NLP is used by large companies and corporations that enrol their employees on NLP courses and seminars to improve their performance. Ostensibly, NLP is used for the benefit of the employees, but it should be remembered that *the trainer is paid by the employer to synchronise the employee's ambitions and desires with those of the company and to teach the employee to manipulate in turn*. Sometimes this training becomes dangerous when it interferes with the trainee's personal life, in which case the trainee becomes a resource to be exploited, subject to calculations of interests and profit. Last but not least, NLP can be applied in the political realm, especially during election campaigns.

In general, the methods used in NLP place an unnaturally high emphasis on controlling those around you. People, i.e. the *other people*, are seen as a kind of computer (or robot) that is easy to program or de-program if you know which keys to push. What does a person who attends NLP classes pursue? To learn how to convince their interlocutor of a certain thing, either

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[296] Christian Iordănescu, *NLP și magia comunicării,* p. 29. The same idea, in Walter Lubeck, *Manualul NLP-ului spiritual*, p. 16, stating that NLP can be used to develop human potential, but it can also be used to control other people or human groups.

in marketing or politics, using a whole arsenal of techniques and methods to do so.

A controversial aspect of NLP is the idea that success can be copied or replicated. For Anthony Robbins, a prominent leader in the field of personal development, the key to success in life was to adopt patterns of personal fulfillment. As he had become overweight, he states that he began to realise that all he had to do was to model himself on slim people, find out what they eat, what their beliefs are, what they think, which enabled him to achieve the same result. Thus he managed to lose the extra 15 kilos. He did the same in financial matters and in his personal relationships. He started looking for patterns of personal fulfillment[297]. Elsewhere, Robbins declares that if you want to be successful, all you have to do is find a way to copy the model of those people who really succeeded. If one wants to be a more devoted friend, a richer person, a better parent, a more successful athlete, a more prosperous businessman, all one has to do is find models of achievement.[298]

In brief, NLP invites us to find models in people whose purpose in life is purely material: money, success, career. If these people are immoral but successful in life, they should be emulated. This view is based on the premise that we all have the same neurological endowment, so if someone can achieve something, it means that everyone can achieve that thing, provided they direct their nervous system in exactly the same way[299]. However, each person is unique in this world, and the brain is not a computer, it does not follow strict, mathematical rules. On the other hand, as Orthodox Christians, we note that the "NLP philosophy" completely excludes the Person of the Saviour Jesus Christ and the saints of the Church.

Finally, I would like to point out the close connection between NLP and contemporary spiritual alternatives, in the hope that this topic will be further explored in the future. NLP has much in common with scientology which wants to turn the individual into a thetan[300]. One of the most commonly used applications of "anchoring" is to remove problematic states that come from the past[301]. NLP therapy is done through "problem state

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[297] Anthony Robbins, *Putere nemărginită,* Amaltea, 2002, p. 20. The author has worked as a consultant for IBM, AT&T, American Express, the US Army, numerous political personalities and community organisations. He is considered a leading expert in personal development.

[298] *Ibidem,* p. 35.

[299] *Ibidem,* p. 32.

[300] Muriel Rozelier, *Les stages de developpement personnel se multiplient, les risques de derives aussi,* „Le monde" 3 July 2004.

[301] Christian Iordănescu, *NLP și magia comunicării,* p. 145.

induction", i.e. reliving the unpleasant moment from the perspective of the present, with all the sensations this implies. The technique of "anchoring" unpleasant memories is similar to the way in which the Scientology engram is erased by auditing. Some NLP therapists lead their clients into the past to relive the events that have affected them. Interestingly, sometimes retracing the past goes all the way back to the moment of birth and beyond, which is similar to Scientology[302].

New Age NLP has a well-defined place in the great New Age synthesis, being used, in particular, alongside Reiki and other alternative healing techniques. An case in point is Reiki master Walter Lubeck, mentioned in the previous chapter, who also specialises in NLP, shamanism, homeopathy, nutritionism, martial arts, Feng Shui and the use of crystals. Lubeck, who declares that he wants to contribute to the early arrival of a new „golden age" of humanity, has developed the concept of „spiritual NLP" (The Handbook of Spiritual NLP/*Manualul NLP-ului spiritual. Punți spirituale spre o legătură armonică dintre inimă și minte*, Mix, 2007). Spiritual NLP is predicated on three essential spiritual principles: the „ability to love", „developing awareness" and „responsibility", each of which is defined in the spirit of New Age ideas[303].

Reiki master Risvan Vlad Rusu is also a specialist in NLP and many other Reiki masters have taken NLP courses. Incidentally, there are similarities between Reiki as taught in Romania and NLP. Through Reiki, one claims to be able to transmit energy in the past, for healing illnesses, memories, but also in the future, for preparing meetings, exams. Thus, we will have to visualize the examination scene and apply the symbols on the examiner's figure or silhouette and once again on our own. During the application of the symbols, we will mentally formulate the idea: as long as I am in that place, the universal energy will flood those to whom we have applied the symbols for their benefit[304]. This statement is very similar to what happens in NLP, but also in Scientology when hypnotic regression is used.

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[302] Dilts, *Schimbarea sistemului de crezuri prin programare neurolingvistică, E*xcalibur, 2007, pp. 95-119, especially p. 105.

[303] The "ability to love" is understood as harmony with the other living creatures in the world, considering – in thought and deeds – the profound unity that exists between all the elements of creation within the evolutionary process; awareness is understood as the ability to interrelate as many particular elements of creation as possible; responsibility is understood as the ability to control what concerns oneself, rather than perceiving oneself as being controlled from outside (cf Walter Lubeck, *Manualul NLP-ului spiritual*, p. 16).

[304] Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki tradițional. De la gradul I la maestru*, Teora 2008, pp. 76-77.

4.Conclusion

The Human Potential Movement (HPM) is perhaps the most influential and significant aspect of the New Age in Romania today. The message of HMP is conveyed through a series of programs, workshops, seminars and training courses that incorporate ideas specific to the New Age movement. Some of them are spearheading cults, either recruiting openly or using the same methods and techniques as the mother cult. Their modus operandi often leads to mental damage or even psychosis[305].

In many of these programs, the philosophy of life intersects with the religious sphere and individual belief systems. They offer peculiar theories about the nature and principles of the universe, contrary to Christianity. The central message is simple: realize that you are limitless, and this will give you limitless potential. The tenet of unlimited potential in man is opposed to the Orthodox teaching about the human person and his relationship to God.

[305] Singer Thaler, Margaret, *Cults in our Midst,* p. 182.

LANDMARKS FOR A CONTEXTUALIZED MISSIONARY APPROACH

After 1989, many theologians who had the opportunity to study abroad established a new missionary paradigm in connection with the new religious movements that were prevalent in Romania at that time. For instance, Archimandrite Prof. Dr. Teofil Tia examines the theories of secularization and desecularization in modern society, drawing from the theories and typologies of prominent contemporary sociologists such as Peter Berger, Bryan Wilson, and William Beckford, and applying them to the Romanian context.[306].

For his part, the late Professor Dr. Nicolae Achimescu, in his work Noile Mişcări Religioase (ed. Limes, 2000), divides the religious groups that are active in Romania into four major categories: esoteric-neognostic concepts and movements, movements with a religious foundation oriental, groups and currents with a religious-philosophical and psychological character, occultism, and Satanism. The work includes a preface on the causes of NMR proliferation and a chapter on the "controversy regarding the name of the New Religious Movements." As far as we know, he was one of the few Romanian theologians who tackles this widely debated issue on an international level and who tries to apply the results of sociological research to the Romanian religious context at the international level. The last chapter of the book, "Christianity and the New Religious Movements", addresses the topic of inter-religious dialogue, demonstrating that in the Orthodox Church, "any dialogue means testimony". The openness of any Christian towards those of another faith or orientation means nothing more than an expression of his Christian testimony in today's world"[307].

When considering potential missionary strategies in relation to the presence of the NMR, it is essential to consult the work of Rev. Prof. Dr. Valer Bel, specifically in the areas of mission, parish, and pastoral work.

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306 Arhimandrit de. Teofil Tia, *Reîncreştinarea Europei ? Teologia religiei în pastorala şi misiologia occidentală contemporană*, „Editura Reîntregerea”, Alba Iulia, 2003. Pay particular attention to chapter I ("Ritorno del sacro"), which discusses the characteristics of this "return of the religious" in the context of Christian pastoral and mission (p. 12–94)

307 Pr. prof. dr. Nicolae Achimescu, *Noile Mişcări religioase,* ed. Limes, 2002. See especially the subchapter "The context of the emergence of NMR" (p. 19–32), as well as the reflections related to the proselytizing techniques of various religious groups in contemporary society..

Rev. Prof. Dr. Bel demonstrates that we should view the foreign missionaries operating in Romania as "brothers awaiting our love"[308]. He shows also that the proselytizing activity of religious movements, which they call "testimony," is actually counter-testimony when it addresses the already baptized. Father Prof. Dr. Valer Bel emphasizes the need for an active and integral missionaryism in the current context, stating that "the mission is the way in which the members of the church preach and transmit the grace of God to people outside the church or try to awaken them". Christian witness means serving the gospel through word and deed, through the way of life lived in the spirit of Christ, and its essential coordinates are evangelization (Matthew XXVIII, 19-20), sacramental incorporation into the ecclesial body of Christ.This ecclesiological perspective on mission is the Orthodox response to any form of individualism or relativism.[309]. At his turn, Rev. Prof. Dr. Ioan Bria emphasized the imperative of improving the quality of Christian life through biblical instruction and the faithful's liturgical participation, noting that the missionary problem is not only external, but also inside the church, in what its missionaries should act[310].

The missiology manuals of His Holiness Prof. Dr. Nifon, Archbishop of Târgovişte, makes an important contribution in terms of building a coherent and authentic missionary strategy. Missiology is structured on four coordinates: mission, ecumenism, evangelization, and culture[311]. His Holiness Nifon pays attention to the explanation of the missiological vocabulary, the requirements of the mission (he emphasizes the relationship between interculturation and cultural identity), the mission as the building of the Body of the Church, but also the treatment of some very current aspects of the mission in the Romanian Orthodox Church: the participation of the laity in the apostolic mission, the role of women, Christians in the mission,

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308 Pr. prof.dr. Valer Bel, Misiune, *Parohie, pastoraţie. Coordonate pentru o strategie misionară*, Editura Renaşterea, 2002, p.135-169.

309 Pr. prof. dr. Ion Bria, „Probleme ale identităţii creştine" în *Destinul Ortodoxiei,* Ed. IBMBOR, Bucureşti, 1989, p. 342; Idem, *Mărturia creştină în Biserica Ortodoxă,* în „Glasul Bisericii", 1982, nr. 1-3, p. 70-109. Despre atitudinea faţă de Noile Mișcări Religioase a se vedea şi Pr. prof. dr. Dumitru Popescu, *Principii care stau la baza formaţiunilor sectare şi activităţii lor agresiv prozelitiste,* „Ortodoxia", XLIX, 1997, 3-4.

310 Pr. prof. dr. Ion Bria, *Ortodoxia în Europa. Locul spiritualităţii române,* ed. Trinitas, Iaşi, 1995, p. 47

311 Conf. dr. Nifon Mihăiţă, Arhiepiscopul Târgoviştei, *Misiologie creştină,* Universitatea „Valahia" Târgovişte, 2002. His Holiness Nifon remarks that mission "tends today to become a term including the preaching of the word, sacramental, spiritual, and pastoral work" (p. 7). Relatively recently, a course for the use of the Faculty of Theology, III edition [revised and added, Bucharest, 2005] appeared.

the regeneration of the mission in an urban context, dispora as a new missionary typology, Orthodox missiology face to face with postmodernity, etc. According to Rev. Prof. Dr. Gheorghe Petraru, missiology has both a strict sense of evangelization and a broader one of testimony, which refers to the totality of the Christian life. It is impossible to separate the Church's mission from its biblical and theological foundations[312]. Father Prof. Dr. Petraru brings to light other Christian perspectives on mission and missiology, each time highlighting the position of the Orthodox Church[313].

If these affirmations could form some direction as to the missionary approach of the new religious movement phenomena, what about the new religiosity and spirituality? It became obvious that we were witnessing a paradigm shift in terms of religious manifestations in contemporary Romanian society. While the impact of "classical" religious movements tended to fade, other ways of believing emerged that took the form of spiritual bricolage between the New Age, the occult, Eastern beliefs, and elements borrowed from the orthodox tradition. A multitude of books, magazines, and television shows promoted esotericism, gnosticism, and occultism, while other currents specific to the new religiosity advanced rapidly, in an insidious manner, through certain alternative healing practices or through various personal development movements.

Postmodern relativism characterizes all these trends and approaches that propagate cultural and religious syncretism, the elaboration of a new value system, and the promotion of the "new man," the "industrial man," for whom a new culture is necessary. Post-modernism, as a current with multiple ramifications in all fields, was only tangentially the subject of the undersigned's concerns. Prof. Prof. Dr. Nicolae Achimescu and Prof. Associate Prof. Dr. David Pestroiu, from a theological perspective, have articulated a vast field of research on post-modernism. They show that the "postmodern man" is a person who renounces deliberate adherence to all rules and moral standards, doubts everything that is divine and absolute, and no longer wishes for God's existence, while he sees himself as a superman who takes the place of God. From here, the adoption of some of the most diverse religious and spiritual currents is only one step.

In Romania, there is a significant difference in the proliferation of new beliefs and forms of spirituality compared to similar developments in

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[312] Pr. conf. dr. Gheorghe Petraru, *Ortodoxie şi prozeltism,* Editura Humanitas, Trinitas, Editura Mitropoliei Moldovei şi Bucovine, 2000; Idem, *Misiologie Ortodoxă. Revelaţie divină şi Misiunea Bisericii,* Editura Panfilius, 2002, p. 34- 35

[313] Pr. conf. dr. Gheorghe Petraru, *op.cit,* p. 162. Pr. conf. dr. Gheorghe Petraru, *Misiologia Ortodoxă. Revelaţia divină şi misiunea Bisericii,* Editura Panfilius, 2002

the West of Europe. During the 1970s and 1980s, experts in religious phenomena predicted a gradual secularization of Western society, while Romania was in the throes of a communist regime that strictly prohibited mysticism, occultism, and other related practices. Subsequent developments contradicted these predictions about the secularization of Western society. During the 1980s and 1990s, it became evident that secularization and religion were no longer mutually exclusive. In search of spiritual support, people resorted to various forms of religiosity, a phenomenon known as the "return of religion" (Michel André), "revenge of God" (Gilles Kepel), or "de-secularization" (Peter Berger). These dynamic developments coincided with the fall of the communist regime in Central and European countries. However, interestingly, the religious scene in Romania does not align with the Western one but has witnessed, for about a decade, a revival of the Orthodox faith, especially among young people. This situation gradually changed only with Romania's accession to the European Union, when young people went abroad to work or study, and when many Western ideologies and spiritual beliefs conquered Romania.

But what are, concretely, the features of the current religious landscape, and how can we relate to its specificity? Frédéric Lenoir, the well-known specialist in the study of religious alternatives, described the general phenomenon, starting from the premise that "the modern religious man is more of a nomad than a sedentary one". He challenges the notion of modernity evolving independently from religious sensibility, demonstrating that we are currently experiencing a new phase in the individualization and globalization of religion. This is manifested in the reshaping of the world through a "spiritual nomadism" that draws inspiration from a variety of spiritual traditions. The French researcher also showed that this process isn't just about new spiritualities and currents; it's also about identity re-folding in the heart of the great traditions that feel the need to return to certainties in the most different ways, such as through fundamentalism or even sectarian replications[314].

As Colin Campbell has demonstrated, the emergence of new religious movements or alternative spiritualities is likely to reveal something significant about the nature of contemporary society itself[315]. Studies of new religious movements are somewhat predictable when focusing on their

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[314] Frédéric Lenoir, *Les Métamorphoses de Dieux. La nouvelle spiritualité occidentale*, Plon, 2003

[315] Colin. Campbell, Some comments on the new religious movements, the new spirituality and post-industrial society. *New religious movements: a perspective for understanding society. Studies in religion and society*, 1982, 3: 233-242

teachings, practices, patterns of recruitment, and authority. However, understanding the new religiosity and spritualty requires an examination of the surrounding environment, the broader social context, and the cultural milieu. All the movements and currents addressed in the present book are based on the premise that contemporary man seeks material achievement, career success, health, peace and spiritual harmony. They claim to possess special information and techniques to achieve all these ideals and then reach perfection in this life.

An important feature of this so-called spirituality is narcissistic self-replication which imposes standard attitudes: "I am my own authority", that "truth must come from my own experience", that "I have my own faith". The dominant idea of this spirituality is that contemporary man does not obtain the results he wants in this life because he has been indoctrinated by society and the mainstream culture. He must come to the "experience of self", that is, to inner spirituality. This is why all these groups and currents we have discussed reject institutionalised religion in favour of a tailored spiritual practice and come with the promise of self-salvation by means of techniques and methods, in which the subject "retains control" over his inner evolution[316]. However, the spiritual alternatives presented tend to accommodate themselves to the dominant religious culture or, at least for reasons of proselytism, claim that there is no contradiction between the teachings they propagate and the religious background of prospective followers[317].

The forms of alternative spirituality I have addressed have particular views about divinity, human nature, life and death, morality or spirituality, all of which being in contradiction to Christian teaching. They assert that everything is relative, that there are no moral values, that people are gods and create their own reality. Throughout this study, I have shown that the "theology" of alternative spirituality is based on three themes that recur obsessively in the discourse of these groups: pantheism, the relativisation of

[316] Rev. Professor Nicolae Achimescu noted: "The object of modern consumer society is the human self existing here and now, not some existence in the afterlife, much less the Kingdom of God. If one wonders about human salvation, it is summed up very succinctly: the realisation or discovery of one's own self, and direct and immediate experience. This means personal progress in optimal conditions, taking all opportunities possibilities on the personal level and overcoming all obstacles that may arise in the process…" (Pr. Prof. Dr. Nicolae Achimescu, *Noile Mișcări Religioase,* Limes, 2004, p. 51)

[317] „Reiki is sacred, but there is no religious practice and it can be undertaken by anyone regardless of their faith or religion. Reiki practices do not contradict any religious practice and do not presuppose any religious affiliation. Reiki practice does not require fasting or meditation, nor is it influenced by these practices". (Dumitru Hristenco, *Reiki tradițional. De la gradul I la maestru*, Teora 2008, p. 21)

the divine-human person of the Saviour Jesus Christ, and an anthropology centred on the self-divinisation of man.

This “creed” brings back an old enemy of the Church - Gnosticism, enriched with theosophical ideas and adapted to post-modern civilization[318]. Neo-gnosticism is in vogue in contemporary society. The book *The Gnostic Gospels*, published by Elaine Pagels in 1979, based on the Hag Hammadi manuscripts (a collection of pseudo-epigraphs and Gnostic writings discovered in Egypt in 1945), was a best-seller in America and served as the inspiration for the *Da Vinci Code*. The book *The Gnostic Gospels* was published in Romanian translation in 2009 by Herald Publishing[319].Today’s man does not feel guilty for his own mistakes, because, according to Gnostic principles, all experiences, including negative ones, help him grow, and mature spiritually. Therefore, for him there is no sin, no heaven or hell, no salvation. The man of spiritual alternatives is a self-sufficient man who needs neither revelation, nor salvation, nor any help from outside. *For him, true “spirituality” consists in knowing, and this has its own salvific power in itself*[320].

Instead of salvation, post-modern spirituality proposes enlightenment, through which the person will realize that they are divine. Various techniques or practices (meditation, channeling, spiritual guides, etc.) achieve enlightenment. Reincarnation also leads to enlightenment, perceived as a chance to purge karma. Many Pagans, New Age followers, and Reiki masters share the idea that when someone dies, they reincarnate into another human being, animal, or plant[321]. However, the Western adepts of reincarnation isolate it from Easter companion concepts like karma or transmigration. The concept of transforming into non-human vine forms is also absent, because these beliefs are incompatible with Western values.

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[318] Franc Rode, *Ideologie religiosa e visione cristiana di Dio in Europa*, in G.R.I.S, *Il destino delli uomo secondo i cattolici e seconde le sette,* Leuman, 1991, pp. 123-132; *Celălalt Noica,* p. 169.

[319] The book includes the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of the Egyptians, the Gospel of Mary (the starting point of the novel The Da Vinci Code), and the Gospel of Thomas.

[320] Michel Lacroix, *L’ideologie du New Age*, Dominos Flammarion, 1996, p. 56.

[321] Hamilton, Malcolm, "The Easternization: Critical Reflections," Religion 32 (2002), p. 243, Harvey Cox (1977), who feared that the West would abandon Christianity due to this oriental current, recognized the role of Western spirituality as early as the 1970s. In 1999, Colin Campbell advanced the extreme view that Western Christianity is not just borrowing, but rather its entire ethos is shifting towards the East. He argues that an "Oriental" cultural paradigm has replaced the Western cultural paradigm in Western societies, whether Catholic or Protestant.

Aspects such as holistic healing, complementary and alternative therapies, and wellness (everything related to body shaping) in the West are domains separated from their religious, spiritual, and philosophical background, which in the East defines their meaning and purposes[322].We must see everything that aims to integrate mind and body and emphasize mental concentration in the pursuit of inner harmony and a higher state of consciousness as an expression of a tendency towards a religiosity without beliefs and deeds, or rather towards cultivating a sense of well-being and self-transcendence that does not involve attachment to an institutional belief or identity.

In the introduction to this book, I anticipated that all forms of "alternative spirituality" are, in fact, manifestations of the New Age spirituality, emphasizing one or another of its characteristics. Hopefully, the book has clearly demonstrated that the New Age is a veritable ideological laboratory for contemporary religious and spiritual manifestations, and that they have borrowed its language, themes, and techniques. Neopaganism emphasizes New Age pantheism; modern Reiki is part of New Age alternative healing practices; and the Human Potential Movement emphasizes the New Age idea that we are all gods and that we can harness the inexhaustible potential within us[323].

New Age spirituality is not far removed from the "new man" project developed by totalitarian regimes in the 20th century. Totalitarianisms emphasised the malleability of man, the possibility of transforming man through education, conditioning and propaganda. This is exactly what the trainers, or gurus, of these movements teach, namely that a person's values, thinking, moral or religious convictions can be deprogramed and reprogramed so that the followers feel that they are creating their own lives.

Our fellow people's interest in everything that promises higher knowledge and the development of human potential aligns very well with the post-modernity in which we live and which pushes everyone to self-realisation. Success in life and career is the true religion of modern man. And this "religion" is sold like any product of the consumer society. The players in the religious market have, as we have seen, unquestionable managerial skills and are quick to respond to demand with a rich supply of courses, seminars and therapies, which claim to teach how people to enhance their own potential[324]. The clientele is very heterogeneous: young people attracted by

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322 Hamilton, Malcolm, „The Easternization: Critical reflections", *Religion* 32 (2002), p. 252

323 Michel Lacroix, *L'ideologie du New Age*, Dominos Flammarion, 1996, p.18.

324 Pr. Dan Bădulescu, *Împărăția răului: New Age Originile, istoricul, doctrinele și consecințele sale din perspectivă ortodoxă,* Christiana, 2001, p. 20.

mystery, curious to join initiatory or secret groups; middle-class people, concerned with esotericism; "decent, faithful people" seduced by healers, magicians, wondrous apparitions; society's outcasts looking for a group that will "adopt" them and recognize them for what they are. Many of our contemporaries simply feel the need to broaden their religious culture, to get to know the old religions of the East or the ancient world, to experiment with esotericism, occultism, gnosis. There are also pragmatic people who, by joining these groups or currents, aim to solve their personal problems or advance in their careers.

Alternative forms of spirituality promote the idea that Christianity is outdated and that a synthesis of all the world's religions is needed. Father Symeon of Essex Monastery notes that Christians today are drawn to a spirituality that can be reached without much effort. Genuine Christian holiness comes through repentance and cross-bearing, but today's man wants neither to repent nor to suffer. Spiritual quests are often driven by pride, as opposed to the Christian path, which is walked in humility. This is why the offer that "you will be gods" is so easily taken up and accepted. Many of our fellow human beings declare that they are Christians, but in reality they take from the Holy Scripture only what they like or what they understand and in this way end up rejecting basic teachings of the Church[325].

As already anticipated in the introduction, the difficulty in evaluating all these forms of alternative spirituality from a missionary perspective is that they have almost nothing to do with Christianity. Even the spearheads through which they manifest themselves: pantheism, polytheism or Gnosticism, are no longer exactly the same as those against which the Holy Fathers fought in the early Christian centuries. Moreover, I have demonstrated that Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) holds a distinct position in the grand New Age synthesis, particularly in conjunction with reiki and other alternative healing techniques while certain reiki masters from Romania are also specialists in NLP, and in this sense, we encounter the notion of "spiritual NLP," which takes into account three essential spiritual principles: "the capacity to love," "the development of the capacity for awareness," and "responsibility," each of which is defined in the spirit of New Age ideas.

Reiki transmits energy not only in the past to heal diseases and memories, but also in the future to prepare for meetings and exams. This statement bears a striking resemblance to the use of hypnotic regression in both NLP and Scientology. NLP also has many points in common with

[325] *Celălalt Noica. Mărturii ale monahului Rafail Noica însoțite de câteva cuvinte de folos ale Părintelui Symeon.* Pr. Eugen Drăgoi, Pr. Inel Țugui (eds), Anastasia, 2004, p.173.

Scientology, which wants to transform the individual into a thetan (god). One of the most frequently used applications in NLP is "anchoring," the purpose of which is to remove problematic states that come from the past. "Problem state induction" in NLP therapy involves reliving the unpleasant moment from the present perspective, along with all the associated sensations. The "anchor" problem associated with unpleasant memories bears similarities to the auditing process that erases the Scientology engram. Future research should go deeper within the new religiosity, highlighting the paradoxical attempt at harmonization among the most diverse systems and currents.

Therefore, a correct missionary stance must begin with adequate information, as I have strived to provide throughout this study, and end with a relevat response, anchored in the realities we experience. And this can be achieved, in our opinion, on three levels: *institutional*, through bodies specially authorized to monitor new religious movements and forms of alternative spirituality (without these, the Church's ministers will fall into the trap of these groups' fake humanism and even advocate for them); *missionary*, i.e. to make known to today's man the content of the faith, to show that Orthodoxy can offer a deep and authentic spirituality (in this way it will remove the tendency to look elsewhere for spiritual fulfillment); *liturgical and pastoral*, because the opportunity for practising Christians is to adhere with all their strength to the divine-human person of the Saviour Christ and to acquire, through prayer and the sacraments, the gift of the discernment of spirits[326].

Confronting modernity is not without risks. Globalism's ambivalence has become an unavoidable reality. On the one hand, globalization, which involves the idea of unifying human societies, leads to the relativization of national or community identities, which are the means by which a specific people or community defines its existence. Thus, there is the challenge of homogenization, of creating a global culture such as consumerism, which becomes the measure of all things in a society emptied of meaning. On the other hand, globalization particularizes, promoting individualism and pluralism, which manifest religiously through a multitude of faiths and denominations, as well as a plurality of opportunities for religious commitment across the globe.

The dynamics between these currents continue to be a great challenge for the Romanian Orthodox Church, but also a stimulus to discover the constructive and creative role of Orthodoxy in the new socio-political and cultural conditions. The sociologist Peter Berger, in his famous

[326] „Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world." (I John 4, 1) .

theory of secularization, showed that the meeting of tradition with modernity will force the traditional churches to adopt either the "liberal way," making compromises with modernity, or the "sectarian way," in the sense that they will remain closed to any external stimulus. We hold the belief that Orthodoxy, rooted in tradition and its rich spiritual treasure, maintains a balanced perspective that avoids extremes. The contemporary religious metamorphoses I have just mentioned embody both challenges and opportunities for the Orthodox Church and push it to adopt a courageous and constructive attitude, which leads to rediscovery and affirmation of the Orthodox Church's true eschatological teaching; finds ways to increase the role of the laity in the Church's life while sustaining the responsibility of the priestly mission, and makes the most of contemporary media resources.

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